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"NOW," SAID THE MAN STERNLY, "THE POLICE HAVE THEIR EYES ON YOU."

OR,
Jigger's Grand Bulge.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RALPH CUTS LOOSE.

"I'm goin' to cut loose," repeated Ralph.
"Cut loose? What do you mean?" demanded the large, fierce-visaged woman.
"Mean just what I say. You have licked me for the last time, and I ain't goin' to stay here any longer and be licked fer nothin'!"

"Whipped for nothing! As if you haven't richly deserved every whippin' you ever got at my hands. I'll show you whether you are goin' to cut loose or not, Ralph Gowger; I'll show you!"

"Keep off! If you try it any more I am goin' to fight, that's all. I don't believe you are my true mom, anyway."

At that the woman stopped short with sheer amazement.

"You don't believe that I am your mother!" she exclaimed. "What are you thinking about, Ralph Gowger? If I am not your mother, I would just like to know who it is, that's all."

"And so would I," muttered the boy, earnestly.

"You are a fool!" the woman cried, fiercely. "What would I be keeping you for, I'd like to know, if I didn't have to? Of what earthly use are you, or ever will be? I'll show you whether I am your mother or not; I'll tan your jacket for you again. What put that into your head, anyhow?"

The boy was a sturdy, handsome lad of fourteen.

He had black hair and eyes, an open, honest face, and looked strong and active.

And he was, too. He had yet to meet the boy of his size and age who could lay him on his back or excel him at running and jumping. And when it came to a fight, he could take his own part.

Ralph was a wide-awake New York newsboy.

He was so decidedly wide-awake, in fact, that he was called "Ready" Ralph, the "Rustler."

He lived with one Susan Gowger, a homely, masculine-looking termagant, who claimed to be his mother, but which Ralph, of late, had grown to doubt very much, and now he had openly declared it.

He had just received a pretty severe trouncing, with a strap, at the hands of this amiable creature, and as soon as released had voiced the declaration with which our story opens. He had done nothing for which he deserved the whipping, and his spirit was too proud to bear it longer.

"Keep off, I tell ye," he warned. "Even if you be my mom, you have made me hate you, and I'll lam my fist in your eye as quick as a wink if you touch me again! I mean it, you bet I do! You have 'bused me all that I am goin' to stand, and I am goin' to cut loose, and that settles it! I won't be much loss, 'cordin' to what you have allus said."

"What put it into your head that I wasn't your mother, I am askin' you?" the virago demanded. "Who has done as much for you as I have?"

"And a big lot you have done."

"What's that?"

"I say it's a big lot that you have done. You have never sent me to school a day in my life, but have kept me sellin' papers every day, in all kinds of weather, when you didn't have to do it at all."

"How do you know what I didn't have to do? You don't think it has cost anything to clothe and feed you, maybe! If you wasn't my own boy, I'd mighty quick tell you to go, and good riddance to you; but as it is, the law compels me to take care of you whether I want to or not."

"Well, I am goin' to cut loose, and that settles it. Guess you won't mourn fer me a whole lot, if you have only kept me 'cause the law says you must. You can tell the law that I cut loose on my own hook, and I guess they won't take much pains to look me up."

"But I say you are not goin'!"

"And I say I am. I have made up my mind, and you had better make up yours

the same. I have said that I don't believe you are my true mom, and neither I do. I don't look one bit like ye, and there is nothin' alike between us, no way you k'n put it. Here is the money fer papers, what you set me up with mornin's and the profit on it, every cent; and now I'm off. You needn't put no crape on the doorbell fer me; I won't be missed."

Ralph had taken some money from his pocket while speaking, and, slapping it down on the table near at hand, turned toward the door.

"Stop!" cried the woman.

He did so, with his hand on the knob and the door ajar.

"Well, what ye want?"

"I want to know what you mean by such conduct?"

"I mean business, right from the word git; goin' ter cut loose, jest as I said."

"You shall not do it! I'll see whether your own mother has any control over you or not! I'll whale you within an inch of your life, but what I'll make you understand—"

She made a dash at Ralph, but he was out like a flash.

"Ta-ta!" he called back. "See you later!" And then he sang—

"Put away the little bootsies
That your Ralphie used to wear,
And the pretty—"

But the irate vixen was making a charge at him, and he had to stop singing and break for the street.

The woman followed him to the door, but he was by that time out of reach, and, paying no attention to her call, he ran on and disappeared around a corner, leaving her in the lurch.

CHAPTER II.

A PRECIOUS COUPLE.

Susan Gowger was an angry woman.

She slammed the door and strode back along the hall to her sitting-room in a towering passion.

"I'd like to know who has been putting him up to that," she growled to herself. "I'll bet he never thought it out without some help, and I am goin' to know who it was."

But she did not clearly see just how she was going to find out.

This woman kept a boarding-house, by no means of the first-class sort, and was comfortably well off.

Ralph had hit the truth in all he had said; that she could have supported him and sent him to school, had she wanted to do so, instead of making a street Arab of him, as she had.

She paced the floor with heavy, man-like strides, causing a loose sash of one of the windows to rattle every time she crossed. She kept jawing away to herself the while, and was still so engaged when there came a ring at the doorbell to claim her attention.

She smoothed down her ruffled feathers—figuratively speaking—pulled her cap straight on her head and felt of the bow at her neck, and went to the door.

Perhaps it was an applicant for a vacant room she was advertising.

When she opened the door she found there a gentlemanly-looking man, of good appearance, and she recognized him.

"Oh! it is you," she remarked.

"Yes, Mrs. Gowger, I have dropped around to pay you what is due."

"Very well, Mr. Titherton; come right in, please. You are always a welcome visitor, I assure you."

He entered the house, and when she had closed the door she conducted him to the sitting-room, where she placed a chair for him and he sat down, she doing the same.

"Here is what is due you, madam," he

said, handing her some bills. "How is the young rascal getting along? What is the prospect of his turning out about as I desire to have him turn out?"

"I think the prospect is most excellent, Mr. Titherton," the woman answered, as she took the money and put it away. "He is developing a fine temper; when he left the house only a few minutes ago, he threatened to strike me in the eye if I attempted to detain him."

"Ha! is that so?"

"Believe it, Mr. Titherton, it is just as I tell you."

"What caused him to say that? You were a little severe with him, perhaps; I mean too severe."

"I had just given him a licking, I admit, for his sass to me, and he no sooner got away from me than he declared that he was going to cut loose—that was his word, cut loose!"

"Then he has cleared out?"

"Yes."

"The deuce! You were careful not to say so before you took my money. You have got to find him, madam. Do you hear me? I say you have got to find him and bring him back here again."

"Well, I do not know that it is my business to go looking for him, Mr. Titherton. If you can find him, and want to bring him back here, I will try to see to it that he don't get away again; but you will have to pay more, for he is bigger, now, and all the more trouble."

"Well, maybe you are right, regarding that; I will pay you a little more. And I will see to it that he is soon back again under your roof, too. Confound him, I wish he would take sick and die!"

"Mercy on me!"

"Oh, I mean it, Mrs. Gowger! I have never spoken out so plainly to you before, but that is exactly the way I stand toward the brat. If you could run him into a good, wholesome case of smallpox, it would suit me to death. Of course, you are not to infer that I would kill him."

"Oh! mercy! of course not!"

"Well, I will try to place him in your hands again, and when you get him you will know how to deal with him."

"I think I will."

"Break his back for him, if necessary, but you must make him obey you."

"I suppose I ought to tell you what he said, too, Mr. Titherton."

"What did he say?"

"Why he declared that he believed that I was not his mother—"

"The mischief he did!"

"Yes, and I suspect that somebody has been stuffing his head, and he has got high notions in his mind."

"There is all the more reason, then, why you should have him under your control a little longer, Mrs. Gowger. And when we get hold of him we will attend to him, I promise you. I will make it worth your while, Mrs. Gowger."

"Oh! I can well believe that, Mr. Titherton."

"Well, I will say good-day. Be ready to receive your dutiful son at any time, and I think it will not be long before you have your grip on him again."

"I hope so, anyhow, and then I promise you that I will make him dance to a merry tune, Mr. Titherton." And so saying, she accompanied him to the front door and showed him out.

"I could have cut off my tongue," she exclaimed to herself, "when I first let out that he was gone, for I could have kept right on drawing that money from him; but, from what he said, I guess there is a deeper game to be played, and I'll sound him on that next time he comes here."

CHAPTER III.

READY RALPH'S PARD.

"Well, here I am, cut loose fer fair," said Ralph to himself, when he had gone some distance.

He had ceased to run by this time, and was walking leisurely, and as he went along he busied himself with thinking what he should do, now that he had relieved Mrs. Gowger of responsibility.

"Needn't tell me no more that she's my mom," he said to himself. "I don't cotton to her worth a cent, and never did. If I was her own kid she would have brought me up different from what she has, that is a sure thing. Nixey! There is no Gowger blood in me, and I'm bettin' on it!"

He gave a snuff of disgust at the thought, for he had grown to hate the woman most cordially.

"Now, what am I goin' to do?" he asked himself. "First off, I'll go to the Bleecker Street Savings Bank and draw on my reserve fund. That's where I got the bulge on the old dame, and she never suspected it, either. And I don't know as it was a bit dishonest. I gave her back her capital every night, and every penny besides, so she had no room to kick."

Ralph was a "rustler" in more ways than one. One day he had invested Mrs. Gowger's money twice, and he kept the second earnings.

For several days he did the same, until he had a capital of his own, when he "rustled" and did double business, giving Mrs. Gowger her full returns, but at the same time earning double for himself.

And his savings he had put carefully away in the bank mentioned, in his own name, of course, except that he had given his name as Ralph Ready instead of Ralph Gowger. He did not mean that any of it should fall into Mrs. Gowger's hands if he was able to prevent it.

He had quite a snug sum to his credit. "Yes, that's what I'll do first," he decided, "and then I'll go and hunt up Jigger and have a talk with him."

Accordingly, he bent his steps in the direction of the savings bank, and on reaching there, drew out enough, added to what he had cleared from the present day's work, to start him off.

"Now," he mused, as he turned away, "I am all hunk for the present. Got enough fer grub, papers and lodging, and that is all I need jest now. And I'll defy anybody to git holt o' my bank book, where I carry it, in the secret pocket I made in the linin' of my jacket."

He now made his way in the direction of City Hall Park at a brisk pace.

Arriving there, he sauntered around, looking for some one he evidently desired to find, and presently espied him.

It was another newsboy, like himself, but one who was not quite so well clad, for Ralph usually wore whole clothes and had shoes on his feet, whereas the other was ragged and barefoot.

But there appeared to be something in common between the two boys, for they were both bright-appearing fellows, and of about the same age. Ralph seemed a little the more rugged of the two, and was the better looking, but the other had a keen eye and bright face.

"Hello, Jigger!" called Ralph.

"Hello, Ready!" the quick response.

"Most sold out?"

"I'm gettin' there. Yours all gone?"

"I'm not sellin' the evenin' papers today; I have retired."

"Why, what's up? What do you mean by retired? Have you give up de biz? I hope not."

"Why?"

"'Cause' be lonesome here wi'out you."

"Well, you will see me doin' business again at the old stand in the mornin', if nothin' happens."

"That's good."

"Here, give me half of what you've got and I'll rustle a little for you and work 'em off, fer I want to have a talk with you, Jigger."

"All right; here they are, and glad to get your help, fer you kin sell two to my one any day in the week. You are a rustler fer fair, when you make up your mind to be."

So the other boy gave half his papers to Ralph, who undertook the business of selling them with his usual snap and vim, and in a reasonable time they were all gone and he hunted around to find Jigger to hand over the money he had received for them.

Jigger, too, had been doing well, and in a little time longer had disposed of his last.

"Now, what's the word?" he asked of Ralph.

"Where do you lodge now'days?" asked Ralph in response.

"At No. — Bowery."

"Decent place?"

"Fair to middlin'."

"Don't have a room to yourself?"

"Scoop extras, no! Think I'm a prince? I ain't."

"Well, how would you like to have a room, you and me together, and share the cost?"

"Whew! Now you're talkin'. But what is the racket? Has your mom given ye the cold kick-out?"

"No; but I have taken it onto myself to cut loose and git out, fer I have had that tired feelin' fer a long time, and it got so that I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Well, I s'pose you knowed what ye was about, but it seems to me if I had been you, with a sure-nuff home over my head, that I would have grinned and beared it a long while 'fore I would 'a' cut loose. Mebby you will wish you hadn't, after you have knocked around a while."

"And if you had got whaled about 'steen times a week fer nothin', mebby you would 'a' cut loose a good deal sooner'n what I did. As fer knockin' around, we will go into partnership and share our joys and mingle our weeps, so to say, and that will make it lighter fer us both. And then there's another thing; I have changed my name, and I want you to call me by my new one."

"What is it?"

"Ralph Ready."

"Oh! that's dead easy; that's about what we call ye now, only backwards. But what did ye change fer?"

"'Cause there's no blue blood in me—no Gowger blood, I mean, and I don't want the name. I don't believe that woman is my mother any more'n you are, and I have give her the shake."

Jigger looked serious.

"If it turns out that she is, though," he said, "she may make it lively for you and take ye back again, if she gits on track of ye. What put it into your head that she ain't ye mom?"

"Well, the way she has used me, most. And I have about as good as proved it, too. She don't know that I kin read and write, for she has never sent me to school a day, but I can all the same, and nobody to thank for it, either; I learned it myself; and I have looked up the family record."

"Wot's that?"

"Why, she has got a big Bible, and in it the dates of birth of all the children she ever had, and there ain't one that

fits my case, or comes anywheres near it, neither in age nor name."

"Well, it does look as if you was right, Ralph; you are a rustler fer fair, no mistake, same as I have allus said. And I lon't blame ye fer cuttin' loose, if it is like you said, that she whaled ye fer nothin'. I'll go in with ye, sure I will!"

"Good enough! That settles it, and all we have got to do is to find the room and hang up our hats."

"But I ain't got much sugar, Ralph."

"That don't matter, partner. I have got some, and I will set you up to start with. Come along!"

And so their copartnership was established, and it was to be of more importance, in the near future, than either of them dreamed of then. But let us not anticipate.

CHAPTER IV.

NEATLY TAKEN.

On the following morning Ralph and his pard sold out their papers at about the same time.

Ralph was done first, really, but he turned in and lent Jigger a helping hand, so that they could go home together.

They had secured a room in a house on one of the humble streets to the east of the Bowery, and were proud of their acquisition. They already called it "home."

Strolling up Park Row, they reached Chatham Square, and were crossing, to continue on up the Bowery on the right-hand side, when of a sudden Ralph was seized by a strong hand.

"So I have got you, have I, runaway?" cried a voice.

Ralph gave a start when grabbed, and looked instantly around, his pard doing the same.

They found a big, rough-looking man, who held Ralph with apparent ease, in spite of his struggles, and he smiled at the two boys in a disdainful manner.

"Who are you?" cried Ralph.

"I am a detective, that's who. Your mother set me to lock you up, and I have found you."

"Well, you let go of him," cried Jigger, "or I will kick your shins till I will peel all the bark off, and no foolin'! Do you hear what I say? Let go of him!"

For reply to that, the man gave poor Jigger a sudden rousing kick, lifting him clear off the ground, and at the same moment a cab came up, a cab that had been following the man slowly along, and in a trice Ready Ralph was picked up and landed into it with ease.

There was a man in the cab who grabbed the boy instantly, and the cab went rattling away.

Ralph felt that he was in a bad situation, and he was.

He did not know this man any more than he had known the other. He struggled hard, but the man was the stronger, and Ralph had to succumb.

This man was rather gentlemanly looking, and of good appearance, with black hair and eyes, and a full black beard, trimmed short, and a mustache. He was well dressed, in a business suit.

He had clapped a hand over Ralph's mouth at first, but he removed it when Ralph ceased to struggle.

"You're a fine fellow, to run away from a good home," he said.

"What was it your business?" snapped Ralph.

"Well, it is your mother's business, and she notified the police to find you and bring you back to her. I am a police detective."

"Big business fer a police detective to be dealin' in, I must say. Mebbe if you knowed what a rip-snorter Susan Gowger is, you would take pity on a feller."

"Don't know anything about that; she has got the law on her side, and if you run away again you will go to prison."

"Better send me there this time; I would a heap prefer that."

"You are too big for your clothes, young man. You are just at the age when a boy thinks he knows a whole lot. You will know more when you know less, ten or a dozen years hence."

"And you are going to take me back to that old walrus?"

"Have you no respect for your mother, boy?"

"She ain't my mother, sir."

"Not your mother?"

"Nary!"

"Why, you are a simpleton. She gave us ample proof that she was your mother, and that was all we wanted. You had better submit tamely to her, my lad, or you are likely to come to a bad end."

"I'll come to a worse if she is goin' to engineer my life, that is sure. I prefer to run my own band wagon, and it ain't no use your takin' me back there, for I will run away again the first chance I get; and I won't be so easy to scoop another time."

"She will take care of you, I rather calculate."

In a little time the cab rolled into the street where Mrs. Gowger lived, and soon stopped at her door.

"Now," said Ralph's captor, "I won't put the handcuffs on you if you will promise to behave yourself, and you may just as well do that, for it will not help you any to kick."

"Go ahead with the funeral!" said Ralph.

So he was taken out of the cab and marched up the steps to the door, and his captor rang the bell.

Mrs. Gowger answered the summons, and at sight of the man and his prisoner, she was led to exclaim, clapping her hands together delightedly:

"So soon, Mr. Titherton! You young wretch, you!" to Ralph. "Won't I jest tickle you beautifully for this! I am so glad you found him, Mr. Titherton, for I have been awful worried about him, and—"

"There, there, Mrs. Gowger, let me say a word," the man interrupted, when they had entered the hall and the door had been closed. "When you notified the police, we detectives took hold of the case at once, and it was only a question of time when we should find the scamp."

"To be sure! to be sure!"

But Ralph had noticed that she looked surprised at the mention of her having notified the police.

He was quick of wit, and believed that he understood something more than they cared to have him know—that this very man was perhaps one who was interested in him to his injury and perhaps danger.

"And if he tries it again, all you have got to do is to notify us, and we will have him just as quick, or quicker, for every policeman will be on the lookout for him and he will stand no show at all. And, what is more, you can have him sent to prison if you want to."

"I think I will take all the runaway out of him when I get at him."

"Well, where will you have him put? Shall I let go of him right here? I will do just what you say."

"Bring him up to the top floor. I have a vacant room there, and I will let him occupy it for a while, and try a diet of bread and water, and see how he will relish that."

"Excellent! That is the very way to deal with him. I think you will take the foolishness out of him."

"I bet I will."

"He thinks you are not his mother, he tells me, and he calls you an old walrus. Why, if he were a boy of mine, I would flay him alive."

"You called me that?" cried the woman, turning around on the stairs to shake her huge fist at Ralph. "You wait till I get you alone, and I will show you the kind of a walrus I am!"

Ralph could have choked the man with good will for this piece of spiteful meanness on his part.

"Yes, that was what he called you," the man assured. "But I think you will be able to convince him that you are his mother before you get done with him. Stir him up well, while you are about it."

"Oh! you can bet your life that I will! An old walrus, indeed!" panting very like one as she hoisted her avoirdupois from step to step. "I'll show you what I am before I get done with you! I will make you think that I am something more than a walrus! A walrus, indeed!"

Ralph said nothing; there was no use of it.

When they came to the top floor the woman threw open the door of a small room, and the man marched Ralph in.

There was scant furniture, being only a bed, a stand, and a very small settee, and Ralph took a seat on the latter as soon as the man released his hold on entering.

"Now," said the man, sternly, pointing his finger at Ralph, "see to it that you are a better boy in the future, and that you obey your mother, who works so hard for you. The police have their eyes on you, and you had better keep out of their hands, I warn you."

"I'll be police to him, and everything else," cried the woman, as she stood and glared at the boy, her fists clinched. "If he won't wish that he had never been born, my name ain't Gowger! I'll be up to see you, after a while, my young gentleman, and if I won't make you sing a merry tune, it will be funny! A walrus—an old walrus! I'll settle with you for that, see if I don't!" And she closed the door, as they went out, and locked it.

Things looked rather serious for Ready Ralph just then, but he accepted the situation stoically.

CHAPTER V.

RALPH AND THE VIXEN.

"Well, here's a state of mess, fer certain," said the boy to himself, as soon as left alone. "I am in for it, sure as guns; but I'll give her fair warnin' not to touch me, and if she won't heed it, the worse for her. I'll fight till my toe-nails peel off, now!"

And he meant it!

He went to the window and looked out, though he knew well enough just what the prospect was in that direction.

The window was four stories from the street, and there was positively no means of escape in that direction. It was a sheer descent, with nothing by which he could possibly let himself down.

"She's got me, sure enough," the boy had to admit. "Here I am, like a rat in a trap, and she is the only one that can open the trap; and when she does open it she will play the cat on me and chew me all up, if I don't watch out. But she had better go slow, and I'll give her fair warnin' before she begins. She won't show no mercy this time, and neither will I."

In about a quarter of an hour Ralph heard her coming up the stairs.

"Here she comes!" he exclaimed. "Now the ball will open, and her and me will lead off the march."

She came on, unlocked the door, and entered the room, puffing by reason of her

haste, and in her hand she carried a strap, of which Ralph knew all too well the quality.

"An old walrus, am I?" she cried, as she locked the door and put the key in her pocket. "I'll show you what kind of a walrus I am, you monkey! I am going to whale you within an inch of your life! Do you hear what I say? Within an inch of your life!"

She jerked up her right sleeve, took a firm grip on the strap, and was ready for business.

"I give you fair warnin' that you hadn't better try it," cried Ralph, as he sprang up on one end of the settee. "I mean to fight, if you do, so look out for yourself. I have allus submitted tame enough, but I won't any more, so if you get a bat in the eye it will be your own fault. Keep off, now, for I ain't foolin' in what I say!"

"And you will find that I am not fooling" either, you monkey!" cried the woman. "I am going to skin you alive! A walrus, indeed! I'll make you tlink I'm a threshing machine before I get done with you."

And, so saying, she made a rush at the boy.

Ralph made a jump, however, and landed on the stand, and from there sprang onto the bed, and it did not look as if she was going to find it easy to get hold of him.

"You had better let me get you," the woman panted. "I will lick you all the harder if you don't."

"Go tell that to the marines!" cried Ralph. "You mean to do me up brown, if you do get me, and you will lay it on for all you are worth. But, you have got to get me first!"

"Look how you have scratched that stand, will you? And now you are on the bed with both your feet! Come down off there this very minute, or I will cut you till the blood runs! I won't show no mercy! A walrus—I will make you think that I'm a house afire!"

She could not reach Ralph, but she struck at him with the strap as hard as she could, and kept him jumping from one end to the other of the bed.

"You know what I told you," Ralph again warned. "There will be a fair fight here if you don't let up, and I think I can knock the wind out of you in about one round, when I let loose. I called you a walrus, but you remind me more of a porpoise, the way you are puffing. I am not going to be licked by you again, and that settles it."

"And now it's a porpoise! I'll murder you alive, if I do get you, you see if I don't!"

And she made every effort to get him.

Ralph wanted to make her all the more angry, if he could, for he knew that she would the sooner tire herself out.

But she now threw herself on the bed in order to reach him, and she came very near getting him, too. Ralph escaped barely by an inch, and he saw that something had to be done.

Bracing his feet, he pushed against the wall with all his might, and moved the bed out about a foot.

Quick as thought, he jumped down behind and crept under.

"Ha! Now I have got you!" cried the woman. But she was even further from it than before.

She flopped off the bed in a hurry, and looked under, but Ralph was at the farthest corner, and altogether out of reach, and he positively declined to come out at her urgent invitation.

Never had Ralph seen her in so great a rage. He believed that she could have murdered him then with a right good will. She fairly screamed at him, in her passion, but that did not alter the situa-

tion a bit; she could not get at him, and he would not come out.

She moved the bed this way and that, and ran around it several times, but Ralph was always on the opposite side when she looked under.

"I'll fix you!" she finally threatened. "I'll go and bring up some boiling water and scald you, that is what I will do! I'll show you whether you can defy your own mother in this fashion or not!"

"Yes, do! there's a good old gal!" taunted Ralph, who was now enjoying it. "That is just the kind of a fond mother you are, every time. I like you immensely, I do. I'd like to hug and kiss you this minute. Be sure you bring up enough water for both of us!"

"I'll bring enough for you, don't you fear!"

"All right! Ta-ta!"

She unlocked the door and went out, taking the key, of course, and locking the door after her and hastened down-stairs.

"Now, it won't be so funny if she comes back with hot water," muttered the boy, soberly enough. "And she'll come, just as she promises, never a doubt of it, and here I am, to be scalded!"

He looked hastily around, thinking lively.

"Ha!" he suddenly cried. "Not if the court knows herself, old lady, and she thinks she do."

Quickly he moved the bed over against the door, and as quickly forced the stand between the bed and the opposite wall, endwise, and the door was securely barricaded.

"Now we'll see what you will do about it," he muttered. "You can't get any hot water in here unless you squirt it through the keyhole, and I will take good care to keep out of range of that. Won't she boil, though, when she finds she can't get in!"

He hugged himself, greatly amused at the prospect.

Presently he heard her returning, and she was scolding away to herself as she came.

She unlocked the door, but when she essayed to open it, it did not open worth a copper, and she let out a bellow that would have done credit to an enraged lion. She saw what was up.

"Open this door!" she cried.

"What for?" asked Ralph.

"I'll show you what for, if you don't open it."

"Yes, and you mean to show me what for if I do, too, don't you? I guess we had better keep apart, old rhinoceros."

"A rhinoceros!" shrieked the enraged termagant. After all that I have done for you, that is a fine name to call your mother! A walrus was bad enough, but a rhinoceros— Oh! oh! you wait till I get you!"

And then Ralph sang:

"I'm waiting, my darling, for thee."

"I'll have you out of there if I have to chop down the door!" cried the woman. "I will repay you for all at once, when I get hold of you! I know you are safe, and I will starve you into submission, that is what I will do! Not one mouthful will you get to eat!"

"Don't worry about me," responded Ralph. "There is plenty here to eat, such as it is. I'll begin on the chair and top off with the bed and bedding. I am all hunk, dear mamma, so don't lose any sleep on my account. Go down-stairs like a good old gal, now, and try and cool off. You have worked yourself into a sweat, and you are likely to get cold if you don't take care. Ta-ta, dearie!"

CHAPTER VI.

JIGGER TO THE RESCUE.

Susan Gowger had a temper.

When she allowed it to rise it carried her to the verge of insanity.

She was now so thoroughly enraged that she hardly was responsible for what she did, and Ralph knew by her screams to what pitch she had risen.

When Ralph offered the last-quoted taunt it brought out a fierce yell, and he heard the hot water thrown against the door with all the force the woman could command.

And then there was a scream of another kind, for the water must have splashed all over the thrower in the same instant.

If she could not throw it on the boy, she could not help throwing it in his direction, and she had to let it go; but she had not stopped to reason what the immediate effect must be.

Ralph heard her let fall the pan in which she had brought the water, and she went screaming down the stairs a good deal faster than she had come up, calling for help as she ran, and he could not help laughing as he imagined just what had taken place.

"Served her right," he said to himself. "She got a taste of the medicine she was goin' to give me. Wonder how she liked it? Ha! ha! ha!"

Then he lay down on the bed to think what was to be done.

"She can't keep me here, that is dead sure," he muttered. "There is plenty of bedclothes to make a rope that will let me down to the sidewalk; but it won't be safe to try that till the still night. And, ever then, if she is smart at all, she will have somebody there to nab me."

He did not like the looks of it in that direction, not a bit.

"I wonder what became of Jigger?" he next asked himself. "Ha! that is jest the cheese, if they didn't do fer him in some way. He will come pokin' around to find out what became of me, like as not, and I musn't miss him if he does. Guess I had better 'muse myself by lookin' out the winder while I wait. And I am likely to wait a good while, if I wait for Gowger to let me out."

He now hated the woman so thoroughly that he would not dwell for a moment upon the possibility that perhaps she was his mother.

Going to the other window, he lifted the sash and looked out and down.

On the opposite side of the street was Jigger, sure enough, loitering idly along and surveying the house.

Ralph whistled and drew his attention, and the boy stopped and looked up, a smile lighting his face instantly. But he looked the next moment in an apprehensive way at the windows below.

Ralph had pencil and paper, and, taking these from his pocket, he wrote, so that his partner could see them, these words:

"Go take a walk, Jigger, and come back in ten minutes and look out for another message, in which I will tell you what to do to get me out of my present declimmer."

Having done, he let the scrap of paper drop, and in a few moments Jigger had it in his possession.

He read it, nodded, and sauntered away.

Ralph set to work immediately to write a longer note, at the same time putting his inventive genius at work to discover the means by which the escape was to be accomplished.

"If he could fly a balloon along this way," he mused, "or could call out the fire department, and have them run a ladder up here; but that don't come within bounds of what Jigger is equal to. Will have to give him something easier than that, or he will make a mess of it."

He thought hard.

"That's the cheese!" he suddenly exclaimed, and forthwith he began to write his directions.

He wrote at length, and made it no longer than necessary in order to perfect clearness, and, folding the message in small compass, awaited the reappearance of his partner.

In due time Jigger came sauntering along again, and when he looked up the note was dropped.

Ralph watched till he saw the note picked up, and still longer till it had been read, and Jigger had given the signal that he understood. Then he threw himself on the bed and took it easy.

In about an hour he heard Mrs. Gowger coming.

She tried the door, but found it could not be opened, not even a little bit, and she said:

"Ralph, open the door; I am not so mad now, and I will let you off easy if you mind me right away and don't make me angry again. Come, now, there's a good boy, Ralph."

At the same time she had the strap in her hand, and there was blood in her eye, could any one have seen her at that moment. Ralph did not have to see her to know it, for he understood her too well, and was not to be taken in by any such soft soap as that.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm napping, fond mamma," he responded, in tones meek and gentle. "I wouldn't make you angry for the world, but I don't intend to put temptation in your way, and if I did open the door, I know you would be tempted to break your word and pitch into me, and if you done that you'd pretty most certainly get a black eye."

"Well, you can't stay there forever, that's one satisfaction!" snapped the virago, in her sharp manner, without trying to conceal her anger, "and when I do get hold of ye, the goodness help you!"

She retreated again, and that was the last Ralph heard of her for that day.

Meanwhile Jigger had gone off reading the note through a second time in order to make sure that he understood it aright. And he read it even a third time.

"I'm to go to the big stables at the corner," he said to himself, "and there I'm to make my way to the roofs of the block. It will be dead easy, Ralph says, and I s'pose it would, for him, but him and me ain't one and the same. I don't reckon it will be so dead easy fer me."

"Then," after thinking for a few moments, "I am to take a rope with me, and I'm to make it dead fast to the chimbley, and then I'm to let the end dangle over where he kin open the winder and git hold of it. Oh, yes, Ready, that is as dead easy as kin be, but I wish you was at this end of the combine, that is all. But, as you ain't here, I'll do the best I kin."

Having studied the letter till he understood the directions in full, he put it in his pocket and started for the stables.

The letter was far too long for us to quote.

On coming to the stables, he entered boldly and sauntered down through the middle between the stalls.

"Well, what do you want?" a man presently demanded of him.

"Where's Flinn?" asked Jigger.

"I'm Flinn," was the answer. "Who the deuce are you?"

"I'm Jigger Huff."

"You look like a jigger. What do you want with me?"

"You know Ready?"

"What Ready?"

"Ready Ralph. But mebbly you know him by the name of Gowger."

"Ralph Gowger, that lives just up the street here? Well, I guess I do know him, Jigger!"

"Well, he sent me here to see you."

"What for?"

"To ask you to lend me a good rope and show me through to the roof, so I could go along to the skylight of his house."

"What's all that for?"

"Somethin' is out of fix, and he wants me to help him, that is all. We'll be back here again in about ten minutes, and he'll do his own thankin' for the use of the rope."

"All right! Come along with me, Jigger, and I'll fit you out."

The man led the way, and Jigger followed him, highly elated at the success of his scheme so far—rather, Ralph's scheme.

On the floor above, where the carriages were kept, the man found a rope of good length, and with that on his arm he led the way to the roof, where he helped Jigger up and out.

And not only so, but he got out himself, and when he had done so, said:

"Now, youngster, seems to me you will need a little help to get over to the roof of that house, and I am willing to help you. Then if Ralph needs any more help than you can give, I will be there to assist you. See? Come along with you, for that fellow is a brick, and a good whole one at that."

CHAPTER VII.

READY RALPH'S RESOLVE.

Jigger saw that he was going to have a witness.

This, acting on his own account, he would not have liked, for what knowledge had he of the man?

But, acting for Ready Ralph, who had said the man was the right sort, and to be trusted, he saw it in a different light, and as they went across the roofs he said to Flinn:

"S'pose I might as well tell you the whole of it, now."

"Guess you had, boy, if there is any more to tell. What is the rest of it, then?"

"Ready Ralph is in a fix."

"Ha! What kind of a fix?"

"His mom has got him locked up in a room, and he wants me to get him out!"

"Now I thought that everything wasn't just as it should be, Jigger, but I didn't know what it was, of course. I meant to see if you was the real stuff yourself, for you told a slick story."

"That was what I thought, too, that you didn't more'n half believe me," the boy declared. "But I gave it to you straight, and now to prove it to you, here is a note that Ralph throwed out of the winder to me, and you can read it and see for yourself."

"But I can't read," said Flinn.

"Then I'll read it for ye. Lend your ears to it, and here goes."

And Jigger read the note through from end to end, the man listening with close attention.

"She has locked him in—has she?—the old vixen!" he cried, when the boy had finished. "Well, she will have a time keeping him there, I am thinking. Come along with me, Jigger."

They continued on and presently came to the roof of Mrs. Gowger's stately mansion.

Jigger knew it by the house opposite, which he had noted carefully.

Here they stopped and held final council.

"I see only one thing in the way," said Flinn, as he proceeded to unwind the rope.

"And what is that?"

"It is daylight, and the boy is likely to be seen."

"And what does he care for that?"

"Well, I don't suppose he does, that's so. Now, I'll tell you how we will work it."

"How is that?"

"I'll take a brace by the chimney, and hold fast to the rope, and you put your head over the edge and let it down in front of the right windy. Do ye see?"

"Yes, that is it, sir."

So Flinn braced himself against the chimney and Jigger crept with the other end of the rope to the edge of the roof, where he cautiously looked over to locate the window he wanted.

He had noted it well, so there was no trouble in finding it.

Placing himself directly over it, he let down the rope, and when it came to the window he flung it till it struck the glass.

In a moment more the window was opened, and Ready Ralph looked up.

Some people were moving along the street below, but none of them saw what was going on.

"Are you ready?" asked Jigger, in undertone.

"Ever know me when I wasn't, Jigger?"

"No."

"Well, then, you might know. Have you got the rope double-sure fast up on deck there?"

"Flinn has got holt of it. You can't fall, unless you take him and me and the chimby and the whole business with you."

"All right, just wait till I make a loop and get in it, and then you can give Flinn the tip that I am ready. If you are going to pull me up, that will save my climbin'."

So Ralph made a loop and drew it up around his legs till he could sit down in it, and prepared to swing off.

"Now, ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Wait till I close the winder, and then let her go, but not too fast. Tell Flinn to pull easy."

The word was passed, and, slipping out, Ralph held the rope with one hand, while he closed the window with the other, and that done, he signaled for the hoisting.

Up he went, and it was only a few feet to the edge of the roof.

He took good care that his fingers did not get caught, and in less than a minute he was safely on top.

"Jigger, you are a trump!" he exclaimed, wringing his little pard's hand most heartily. "And you are another, Flinn," catching his hand, too, as he came forward.

"And it is yourself that is the biggest of all," cried Flinn. "Sure I was that something was amiss, and I made up me mind at once to come along with this feller and see what it was, and lucky for your bones that I did that same, maybe, my lad. I won't say."

"Just as well, anyhow," agreed Ralph.

And, while Flinn gathered up the rope, and they made their way over the intervening roofs to the stables, Ralph told them about the scrimmage he had had with his said-to-be mother, to their great amusement.

"Keep this shady, Flinn," he said, at parting with him. "Don't let it out, and the old walrus will never know how I escaped. It will give her something to lay awake and think about o' nights."

"Trust me, my lad," said the good-natured Irishman. "She will never find it out by me, I promise ye."

Ralph and Jigger made haste away from the neighborhood.

"Now, what is going to be done?" asked Jigger, as they hurried along.

"We'll do some dinner the very first thing, for I am about famished," said Ralph.

"I am with ye in that, partner."

"And then we'll go to our room, as we started to do in the first place, and there we will talk over the situation."

"All right."

Accordingly, they sought a cheap restaurant, had a good dinner for fifteen cents apiece, and then repaired to their lodging.

Meanwhile Jigger had told Ralph all about his part in the game, how he had eluded the man who had first seized Ralph, and then followed him to a place where he learned that his name was "Snide" Norwood.

Believing that he was not likely to learn through him where Ralph had been taken, he rightly guessed that he had been taken home, from what Ralph had told him and what he had heard said at the time of the capture, and so had gone there to reconnoiter.

"Now, Jigger," said Ralph, "what is going to be done?"

"There is nothin' to do till it's time for the evenin' papers to be out."

"That is just the p'int, my jiggery partner, don't you see? If I go back to do business at the old stand, I am likely to get scooped again; so it won't be safe."

"I guess you are about right, partner, it won't."

"And that bein' the case—"

"You had better take a new part of the city for your ground, and work up a new trade."

"I have got another idee, though, Jigger, and I think I had better put that into practice first. It may sum up something before I get done with it, if I don't get it in the neck."

"What is your skeem?"

"To play the detective for a week or so, and see what I can find out about things in general and myself in particular."

"And how will you do that?"

"First, I will get onto that feller you say is called Snide Norwood, and I may then be able to spot out the Mr. Tither-ton who has such a live interest in me, fer he don't belong to the police any more'n I do. And if I kin get onto his haze good 'n' hard, mebbly the rest will be dead easy."

"Yes, and mebbly you will be dead easy, too. But go in, pardsey, and if you want any help just call out your reserve, which same is me."

CHAPTER VIII.

READY'S BOLD STROKE.

The two pards held a consultation of some length.

When they had done they understood each other thoroughly, and Jigger knew all about Ralph's plans as far as Ralph knew them himself.

They were to retain their room in common, each to bear half of the expense, but Ralph was going to drop out of business for a few days, as he had proposed, and for the reason given.

And, too, for the additional reason that he believed his safety demanded it, as his recent adventure indicated.

Ralph went out leaving his partner to take a nap.

He went again to the savings bank, where he made another draft upon his little savings.

This he hated to do, for he would much rather have added to than taken from them, but he was in a manner forced to do it under press of circumstances.

He had decided, as a matter of disguise,

to fit himself out with an entire new change of clothes, from shoes to hat, and lay his old outfit aside for work-a-day wear.

Having drawn the money, he proceeded forthwith to make his purchases.

He made it a point to choose everything in a different style from that which he had been used to wearing; thus he altered his looks greatly, and by the time he had done, no one would have taken him for the same boy, meeting him out of his old haunts.

When he returned to the lodging Jigger uttered an exclamation at sight of him.

"Jimminy goose grease!" he cried. "Hardly knowed yer."

"How does it do?" asked Ralph.

"Makes ye look like a blood, Ready, sure enough."

"That ain't the point, my gallus pard. What I want to know is, do you think they will know me in a rig like this?"

"I'll bet yer own mammy will have to put on her specks and take a second look before she could swear to yer 'dentity, and that is the cold, cruel fact, m'lord. You look 'mense!"

"You mean Gowger?"

"Sure."

"Well, please don't refer to her as my mom any more. I have disowned her, and cast her off without a shillin'. There is none of her royal blue blood in my veins, and I'm bettin' on it. If there is, I am sorry for it, that is all. She hasn't got me on her list, as I told ye."

"Well, I hope you are right, Ready, if you can only prove yourself a prince in disguise, or somethin' like that."

"I have got a s'picion, Jigger."

"What is it, Ready?"

"I sort o' spect that feller Titherton is my dad."

"Ye don't say! What makes you think that?"

"Well, he is about old enough to be."

"And how old did you say he is?"

"Mebby thirty-five."

"Well, likely you are right. But what is he so hard on ye for, if he is yer pop?"

"That is what I want to find out. There is a secret in the matter some'ers, and I want to poke at it and find out what it is. Mebby I'll come in for a fortune; who knows?"

"I guess nobody knows it yet, Ready. I don't look fer nothin' like that. I ruther reckon, if your guess is right, that the feller is 'shamed to own ye, and has paid Gowger to take care of ye. Mebby you will be just as well off not to go to pryin' into it."

"Have got to do it, though, Jigger. I can't rest, now that I have made up my mind to know somethin' about myself."

"You are like a good many of our kind; you are here, and that is all anybody knows about ye."

"Ten to one you are right, but there is the one chance that you ain't."

"And that is the chance you are takin', hey?"

"That is it, Jigger."

"Well, go in, and I hope you win; and, as I said before, if you want help, just call out your reserve."

"I'll do that, never fear. And now I'm off. Keep yer eye out fer Snide and Titherton, and if you find out anything, let me now when I see you again. Mebby they will be tryin' to find me."

"All right; I'll play second, best I can." And so they parted.

Ralph felt pretty certain that he would not be easily recognized if he took ordinary care to play his role.

He went first to the place where Jigger said he had left the fellow Snide, and, as it happened, he was just in the nick of

time, for there was Titherton talking with him.

They were standing in front of a fourth-rate hotel.

Ralph hardly dared to venture near enough to hear what was being said between the pair.

If discovered there and recognized, all his trouble and expense would count for naught, and he would in all probability be captured again and returned to the old "walrus."

He had no desire for that, so he remained at a safe distance and was content with watching.

Presently he saw Titherton pay Snide some money, and they then parted, one entering the hotel and the other walking off in the direction of Broadway.

The latter was Titherton, and Ralph set out to shadow him, taking care to remain at a good distance and observe care that he was not discovered, and so they continued, spotted and spotter.

Coming out upon Broadway, Titherton turned northward, and after a walk of some distance, crossed the street and entered a store.

Ralph was in a position to see just which door he entered.

On the front of the store was a sign bearing the business name of Donald Ruleman & Son.

Ralph kept straight on until he was opposite to this store, and there he stopped and a card in one of the windows claimed his attention.

It was a card, printed in big letters, announcing that a boy was wanted, and during the time that Ralph stood there, no less than half a dozen boys entered and came out again.

Ralph had no doubt but that they were applicants.

And, if so, he judged that their general appearance had told against them in the main.

For the most part they were boys of the sallow, cigarette sort, with weak and watery eyes, and having upon them the general stamp of vice that is all too common, and to which boys of Ready Ralph's kind are the exception.

When Ralph had waited a long time, and Titherton did not reappear, a daring idea came into the boy's head.

Why not apply for that job himself?

It would put his semi-disguise to a severe test, if he came face to face with Titherton, but he decided to risk it.

He was learning nothing as it was, and having now waited nearly two hours, it seemed reasonably certain that Titherton belonged there, and if so, it was just the place Ralph wanted.

He crossed the street and entered.

With a white shirt and stand-up collar, neat tie and derby hat, he was very unlike the Ready Ralph of that morning.

A clerk came forward as soon as he stopped within the door to look around, and asked what he wanted, when Ralph inquired for the "boss" of the establishment, and was taken to his office.

He found there a nice-looking old gentleman, with white hair and whiskers, who immediately inquired:

"Well, young man?"

"I see you have got a sign in the window—boy wanted," said Ralph. "I am the boy, sir."

"I guess you are," said the merchant, promptly, with a smile. "You have got assurance enough to make your mark in the world, anyhow, and I like your looks. What's your name?"

CHAPTER IX.

A CONFESSION MADE.

Ralph had to think quickly.

He felt that he had hit the mark, and

that the place was his if he played his cards aright.

It would not do to give his real name, if Titherton was indeed in the employ of the firm, for that would get him into trouble in short order. This was an important point.

And yet his reply was given so promptly that it did not indicate anything of deliberation.

"Russell Ready, sir," he answered.

He had twisted his nickname into shape to answer the purpose.

"That is a good, clean-cut name, my boy. It is something like your face. Where have you been working?"

Another lightning process of thinking, and the answer to this was about as prompt as the other.

"For Huff & Ready, sir," he responded. "Ready was a relation of mine, but his going out of the firm left me without a place, and so I am looking around to find something."

"What line of business was that?"

"Paper dealers, sir."

Ralph expected that the next question would be as to their place of business, and was as ready to answer that, but it did not come.

Perhaps enough has been shown of his quickness to explain fully why he had been nicknamed Ready Ralph, and that he was indeed a "rustler" needs no further argument.

"And how long were you employed there?"

"Several years, sir; in fact, ever since I have been old enough to do anything. I have no parents, sir."

"Then the Ready you speak of was an uncle or something of that sort, I infer. No matter. I suppose that you are well acquainted with the streets of the city, my boy."

"Yes, sir."

"And where do you live?"

Ralph gave the address of his lodging, and added:

"I am living with the Ready I spoke of, sir."

"Good enough, good enough; I guess you will do. Of course, paper is not notions, but you will pick up our line fast enough. I want you merely for messenger at first."

"Yes, sir."

"And your pay will not be a fortune, but if you prove yourself the right kind you will be in the line for promotion. I will give you three dollars a week, and you may come in the morning at eight o'clock. What do you say?"

"I'll be here, sir."

"Enough said. Rogers," to the clerk who had shown Ralph to the door, "you will take that card out of the window, and when this boy comes in the morning you will show him what his duties are till I get down. You may go, boy, and see to it that you are prompt."

"Yes, sir."

Ralph left the store, looking all around for a glimpse of Titherton as he made his way to the door, but he did not get sight of him.

"Well, there's a start in life, anyhow," he said to himself, on reaching the sidewalk. "Never thought of branchin' out like this when I came here. Wonder if I'll be able to hold that posish down?"

He thought he would; at any rate, he meant to try.

"I like the cut of Mr. Ruleman, anyhow," he declared, "and I think I'll get on swimmingly with him, if nobody gets 'tween us. Wonder what the son is like? And I wonder what posish Titherton holds? Hope it is somethin' where he won't run up against me every minute in the day."

But it was still an open question whether Titherton was employed there at all or not.

This thought striking Ralph, he stopped short.

"I ain't done with that feller yet," he said to himself. "If he is in there he has got to come out sooner or later, and it can't be much later, now, for it is gettin' time to close up for the day. Reckon I'll wait around a little longer and try to get onto him when he appears. But it won't do to let Mr. Ruleman see me loafing here, mebbby."

He had a double role to play now, but he felt equal to the emergency, and, taking up his station where he could watch the entrance to the store, he waited.

In about twenty minutes Titherton came forth.

He now wore a silk hat and kids, and a frock coat and light overcoat, in place of the derby hat and business suit of the morning.

"Mebby he ain't a sparkler!" exclaimed Ralph. "A feller might think that he owned the whole business. Mebbby he is cashier, and if that is the case I think the old gentleman had better put a detective onto him before he dips too deep into the tin box. If he ain't that, then he must get a fat salary, that's all. I think I will spot you a little further, my gallus rooster."

And accordingly Ralph set out to follow him.

This was the man, then, who Ralph thought might possibly be his father, and the idea gave him an additional interest.

"He would be the right sort if he was only as good as he looks," the boy said to himself, "but he ain't. I have got proof enough of that in what I heard him sayin' at Gowger's. And it won't do to let him know that I am after him; not any. I must take care."

The man continued on up Broadway for a distance, then turned to the west, down one of the cross streets, and soon mounted the stairs leading to a station of the elevated railroad.

Ralph knew that he would have to move lively now or miss his man, and he recognized, also, that there was a big chance for discovery.

Fortunately, perhaps, a train came along just then.

By hurrying, the man was just in the nick of time to catch it, while the boy would be just in time to wait for the next.

"That settles it," said Ralph, giving up, immediately and retracing his steps. "And maybe it is just as well, for I might have got caught in the act, and there would have been a pickle."

Seeing that there was nothing more he could do that day, as far as he knew, he set out for his lodgings, there to wait for Jigger, and tell him all about the bit of good fortune when he came. And meanwhile, Mr. Titherton went on to his destination, to which we may accompany him.

The man left the train at Thirty-fourth street, walked a couple or three blocks further, and finally mounted the steps of a stately residence.

A servant promptly opened the door to him, and he was admitted.

He was shown into the drawing-room, where, in a few minutes, a beautiful young woman appeared.

He rose to greet her, and she advanced with hand outstretched, a smile of welcome lighting up her face, and she said, as she gave her hand:

"I am glad to see you, Hanson. You said that you would come early, and you have, but, early as it is, I was ready to receive you more than an hour ago."

"And I would have been here an hour earlier, had it been possible, Phoebe, darling."

"You have seen papa?" she asked.

"I saw him to-day. We knew, of course, that it was all right; merely the form of the thing. He accepted me, as a matter of course."

"And he told you all about—about me?"

"He should have done so; I thought you knew, and that it did not matter."

"I am not Mr. Westwood's own child, Hanson."

CHAPTER X.

ENGAGEMENT CANCELLED.

The man Titherton started as if he had been shot.

"Not Norman Westwood's daughter!" he cried. "Then who in the name of wonders are you? But, your father—that is, Mr. Westwood—he knows who you are, surely."

"He does not know."

"Then how came you under his roof?"

"I was found on the doorsill one morning, in a basket, when I was about a year old, and kind Mrs. Westwood took me in and made me her own."

"And that is the whole story."

"That is all."

"Will you release me from the engagement?"

"Yes, and glad to do it," rising with cold politeness. "I am glad that you have been made to show your hand in the game, sir. Inquire, now, carefully as you may, and you will find that the Westwood name is mine by right, after all, and that it might have been a real thing in our marriage. I obeyed Mr. Westwood; he wanted the fortune and you wanted the name. I played a part."

"What are you talking about? In one breath you deny the name, and in the next you claim it. What am I to make out of all that?"

"Do you think you can prove that it is not my name?"

"Ha! That is your meaning, then?"

"Yes, that and more. Here," taking a crumpled letter from her pocket in haste, "read this."

She smoothed out the sheet and put it in the man's hand, and he read the following, in a heavy, masculine hand:

"Miss Westwood—Don't you go frettin' yourself about your name, for it is your own hard and fast enough. The proof will be forthcoming at the right time, if need be. "ONE WHO KNOWS."

"And where did you get this?"

"It came by mail, addressed to me, as you can see by the envelope."

"Well, since what you have told me I see in it only a trick of your supposed father's—"

"You do not suspect that he wrote it, do you?"

"Certainly I do."

"I will not believe it, sir! Leave me, before I hate you! We are quits. I was in a measure forced to play the role, but you were free. I am glad that you are even freer now."

She spoke with an earnestness that made her radiant.

The man looked upon her with admiration, and, taking a step toward her, held out his hand, saying:

"Phoebe, let us begin anew. Looking at you now, I find it was not all pretense on my part, as you accuse. Let the engagement stand, and I am willing to make the exchange—"

"The exchange?"

"My fortune for your name, and pretend that I have got the latter whether it be so or not."

"Never! I despise you, utterly."

"And may I ask who my more fortunate rival may be?"

"One who is beneath you in station, but who is your superior in every other quality that can be named—Max Rutherton."

"Max Rutherton! I might have guessed. Our trusted cashier, by the way. I congratulate you, truly! You are one among a dozen, with him, for his inamoratas are numerous, I assure you. Accept my congratulations. Of course, you will make known the truth to him—"

"Sir! Leave the house this moment!"

CHAPTER XI.

COMPLICATIONS PROSPECTIVE.

Phoebe Westwood ended the interview abruptly, for she swept out of the room after uttering her command, and there was nothing for the caller to do but take his leave.

"Confound it!" he muttered, as he went away, "what am I to make out of all this? I believe it was all a trick to find out just how deep my love was; I believe she is Westwood's daughter, all right."

He had been gone from the house but a little while when Mr. Westwood came home.

Phoebe met him in the hall and drew him into the parlor.

"What is it, child?"

"Tell me," she asked, "did you write this and post it to me, papa?"

"Never," was the answer, as soon as the man had read it. "What can be the meaning of it? Can it be that proof of your birth is coming at last, after so many years? But, no; for it says you are indeed a Westwood. There is some trickery about this, Phoebe."

"But, oh! if it can only turn out that I am a Westwood! That I am justly entitled to the name—. But it is a dream of the impossible. And still—"

"The writer of this note certainly knows something about you, Phoebe, and if he can be found and made to tell what he knows—. Well, useless to speculate; take good care of the paper for the present. And, in the mean time, let Hanson or any one else prove that you are not my child if he can!"

"And you would have forced me, almost forced me, to marry him, papa, when I love Max so much more."

"Maybe I was selfish, Phoebe, but it was a selfishness in which your own interests figured as largely as my own. Max Rutherton is only a poor devil of a bookkeeper, while Hanson rolls in wealth. His fortune will be simply immense on the death of his father."

"Max is poor, I know, but I am not afraid of poverty. Besides, your fortune may turn again at any moment, and everything will be well."

"I must let you decide for yourself, Phoebe. But there is one thing you had better not do."

"And what is that?"

"Let the secret out again."

"Papa! Do you think that I would deceive Max, whom I love, after telling Hanson? I could never do that. But, the result will be different. I know I can assure you of that."

"I hope you will not be disappointed."

"I know that I shall not. I will send for Max in the morning, and tell all to him."

"Why, he cannot come at your bidding, foolish child; he is a slave to poverty; he is not like Hanson, free to go and come at will. Don't forget that Max is a common bookkeeper, with so many hours' work to do every day."

"He can come when his day's work is done."

"I thought I would just remind you, that was all. He is never likely to be more than he is to-day."

"With your help he might, papa."

"I am hardly able to help myself, just now, my child."

"Well, I will trust. That is all I can do. And I will send for Max. He would never come near me unless I did. We are so far above him."

They talked further respecting the schemes that had just miscarried, and at the end of their interview they decided that it was better so. And then they prepared for dinner.

Meanwhile, Ready Ralph, in their humble room, was reciting to Jigger the events of the afternoon.

"And that is the situation, Jigger," he cried, when he had finished. "And now it remains to be seen what the morrow will bring forth. Mebby it will bring me forth, ready for the hospital."

"I wouldn't wonder a bit, or ready fer old Gowger again. You don't expect you kin fool that feller Titherton, do ye?"

"I have fooled him a'ready."

"Yes, but I mean when he has seen you. He will size you up in short order, my way of thinkin'."

"Well, mebby he will, but I have done some tall thinkin' about it while I have been waitin' here for you to come in. Mebby he won't dare to let out that he does know me."

"Why not?"

"Wouldn't I be likely to let out his game with me at Gowger's? And mebby that is somethin' that he would like to keep shady if he kin."

"I dunno but you are right, Ready."

"That is the card I am goin' to play, anyhow, if he cuts up any on seein' me."

"Well, you had a good nerve, to talk up to that old gent the way you say you did, to get the job. But, that was just like ye, to a dot. I wish I could fall into somethin' like it."

"Well, do the same as I did, save up your profits on papers till you get a little ahead, and then branch out and try it. Three dollars a week ain't a whole lot, but I am young and there is a chance for promotion the old gentleman spoke about. I have got my eye on that."

"Wonder if Gowger has missed ye yet?" said Jigger, as if to change the subject.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Ralph. "I would like to know. Suppose we go around there and find out, on the quiet."

"Dare ye?"

"Ever know me to back out of anything?"

"You may get nabbed."

"We'll take chances. Not likely anybody will know me. Come along with me, partner."

They left their lodging in haste, and set forward in the direction of Mrs. Gowger's boarding house, and they were destined to be just in time for the fun, as it happened.

It was now night.

When they came in sight of the house, on the opposite side of the street, they observed quite a group of people in the street in front.

"Somethin' is up," said Ralph.

"Sure pop!"

"What can it be?"

"I take it they must be tryin' to wake you up."

And then they both laughed heartily, and went forward until near enough to hear what was said.

Mrs. Gowger was out in the street, and was indicating to a policeman a certain

window of her mansion, and at the same time was saying:

"That is the room he is in, and he won't answer me, no matter what I do or say, and I am that alarmed now that I must have the door broken in and see what is the matter."

"Well, it must be done, if it is as you represent," said the officer.

"And that is just how it is. Come along, and I will lead the way, and you may bring all the help you want. Come right this way."

The woman rushed into the house, the policeman and several men following her, and among them the boys recognized their friend, Flinn. This delighted Ralph, for from him they would be able to learn all about it, later.

So they waited near by for the outcome of the investigation.

CHAPTER XII.

IMPORTANT INQUIRY.

"I'll bet the old walrus is between a fever and a sweat!" cried Ralph, giving Jigger a playful slap.

"Yes, I'll bet she is, too. Mebby she is afraid you have gone dead on her hands, Ready, and that she is going to get into trouble."

"That is just it. She don't care a fig for me; it is herself she is thinking about. She never did me a kindness in her life, that I can remember. She has no idea that I have got out of the room."

"How could she have?"

"That's the question. She don't know us yet, Jigger."

Presently the two boys heard the sound of blows within the house, and knew what was taking place.

Then, next, light was seen at the window of the room, telling them that the door had been forced and the discovery made that the prisoner was missing.

Persons were seen moving around in the room, then the window was lifted and the policeman and others looked out and made a close inspection of the outside, but without discovering anything.

"Ain't it as good as a circus!" cried Ralph. "It will be a mystery to the old porpoise, and she will grow thin thinkin' about it!"

"It will do her good to have somethin' to think about, hang her picture!"

"You bet! Ha! the light is gone; they are comin' down."

This was true.

The boys drew as near the house as they thought prudent, and in a few moments the door opened, and the officer and the others appeared.

"I don't understand it; I really can't understand it," declared Mrs. Gowger, in troubled voice. "You saw how well the door was blocked; he was in there, that is as sure as the stars."

"And it is as sure as the sun, moon and stars together that he wasn't there when we broke in the door," responded the officer. "And, as you say, it is a puzzle how he got out, unless he jumped out, and if he had done that he would have been found dead down here."

"My poor boy!" wailed the woman. "My poor, froward, misguided boy!"

"Don't worry but what he will turn up all right," the policeman consoled. "It ain't easy to kill boys of that age and size, and it ain't easy to keep pace with 'em, either, sometimes."

There was some further discussion, and the woman closed the door and the people dispersed.

Ralph and his partner followed their friend Flinn, until they had opportunity to approach him when he was alone, and then did so.

"Hello, Flinn!" greeted Ralph. "Tell us all about it."

"Great doughnuts!" cried the stableman. "Is it you, me boy? What have you been doing?"

"Oh, I have been to a fire," explained Ralph, jokingly. "But, tell us all about what the old rhinoceros said and did when she found me gone."

"Ye should have been there, Ready! It was as good as a show, on me word it was. I thought the old dame would have a spell, there and then, when they found you was not there!"

"What did she say?"

"Whist, and I'll tell ye all: We went up, as you know, and the old dame gave the policeman an axe. He knocked first, and, getting no answer, slashed away at the door till he broke it down. Then we shoved away the bed and went in, but not a sign of yourself did we see at all!"

"Well, the policeman looked foolish, the old vixen looked green and yellow, and as for meself, I didn't dare to look at all for fear I would laugh; and they began to search for ye in a way that was funny. I believe the old scolder really shook out the pillows. But, they had to give it up, and I tell ye it will be a nine-days' wonder to them all, I'm thinkin'."

Ralph and Jigger enjoyed a hearty laugh.

"Let her wonder," said Ralph. "And, keep it all mum, Flinn; don't tell a soul, for you will get me into trouble if you do."

"Ah! trust me for that, my lad. What do ye take me for? It is nothing she will be getting out of me, do ye mind. Take good care of yourself, and good luck attend ye."

And so the boys parted with their friend and returned to their lodging.

At eight o'clock next morning Ralph was on hand at the store, as he had been directed, and the man Rogers was just unlocking the door.

"Good-morning," said Ralph.

"Ha! good-morning," the clerk greeted him. "You are right on time, I see. That will score one good mark for you here."

"Glad to hear that."

"Yes; Mr. Ruleman is as prompt as the clock himself, and he likes to have all his employees the same. I think you are going to stand in well with him, if you watch out for yourself."

"Thank you for the hint."

"I rather like you myself."

"Glad of that. What time does the boss come down?"

"See that clock? When it points to half-past nine you will see him come in."

"And what time does the son get around?"

"Nobody knows when to look for him. Sometimes early, sometimes late. He is the only one here that gives Mr. Ruleman any trouble. But, then, he is a boss, too, so it is all right."

"And what time does—"

Ralph was on the point of asking about Mr. Titherton, but checked himself in time.

He was not supposed to know anything about any of the employees of the firm, and he might get into trouble by showing any such knowledge.

"What time does what?" asked Rogers.

"I was going to ask what time the others get here, but it is none of my business, I guess. Just show me what I have got to do, and I will get to work and do something."

"Well, you are right, maybe, but I don't mind telling you. The other clerks get here at any time from now till half-past eight, and Mr. Rutherton, the bookkeeper, will come in at half-past eight as prompt as Mr. Ruleman himself. We are ready for business at nine o'clock sharp."

"Just the kind of a cart I want to ride in," declared Ralph. "I like to go by the clock, and I want the clock to go right, too. Now, show me my work and let me pitch into it."

Rogers indicated what he should do, and Ralph went to work with a will.

He had been at work but a few minutes, when the next person to walk in was Mr. Titherton.

Looking around as he came in, his eyes fell upon Ralph, and the boy observed him without appearing to do so, and saw that he was closely scrutinized.

The man stepped to where Rogers was at work, and asked:

"Who is that, Rogers?"

"A new boy Mr. Ruleman engaged yesterday, sir."

"What's his name?"

"Really, it has slipped out of my mind, sir."

"Call him here."

Ralph was called, and came forward promptly.

"What's your name, boy?" asked Titherton, eying him sharply as he put the question.

"Russell Ready, sir."

Ralph wished now that he had called himself Tom Jones, but it was too late for that. The name he had chosen sounded too nearly like his nickname.

But he looked the man squarely in the eye, and there was not the least sign of recognition on his face. If the man thought he knew him, it was not likely he could prove it by the boy himself.

He looked Ralph over from head to feet searchingly.

"Well, you look like a spry youngster. I guess the old man made no mistake. Get back to your work."

Ralph obeyed, wondering what position Titherton held, that gave him such a standing. Rogers had not mentioned his name in telling about the others. It must be that he was superintendent, or something similar.

Ralph continued at his work until it was done, paying no attention to anything else, apparently, but there was little going on that escaped his notice. And when he had done he reported to Rogers to ask what further duties he had to perform, and he seized the opportunity to ask concerning Mr. Titherton.

CHAPTER XIII.

TERRIBLY ACCUSED.

Ralph took care not to mention the name.

"That," answered Rogers. "Why, that is Mr. Ruleman's son, Mr. Hanson Ruleman, his name."

Ralph could have been knocked down with a feather, and felt that his surprise was betrayed by his face. Lucky he hadn't mentioned the name, most decidedly, he realized.

"What's the matter?" asked Rogers.

"Why?"

"You look struck."

"Why, I took him to be a clerk."

"Ha, ha! Well, he isn't, so look out for him. Here, I will show you what more to do, and by that time Mr. Ruleman will be here, and your place will be in the office to wait on him."

This bit of information pleased Ralph immensely.

The office was the place where he most desired to be, for there, if anywhere around, he was likely to pick up information.

And, it pleased him the more, since the revelation just made, that the man he was spotting was Ruleman's son, and that "Titherton" was an assumed name, to which he had no right.

"Where are we at?" Ralph asked himself, as he went about his further duties. "If my other guess was right, then Ruleman is my own granddad. But that is only a guess after all, and I hope it ain't that way; not that I wouldn't like to have the old gentleman for granddad, but I don't like the other a bit."

And he thought further:

"Anyhow, there is some secret in which Hanson and me are mixed up, somehow or other, and I mean to find out what it is. If he knows me, he will have to be wary how he blows out, now, for I know somethin' about his deal with Gowger, and I can do some talkin' on my side. Reckon the fight is on 'tween you and me, Hanson, old boy, and it remains to be seen which will come out on top."

Ralph held his work back a little, and finished it just at half-past nine by the clock.

At the same time, to a dot, Mr. Ruleman entered the front door, nodded to his employees, and walked straight to the door of the office and entered, and Ralph looked at Rogers.

Rogers jerked his thumb as a signal that Ralph should go in.

He did so.

Mr. Ruleman had put down his cane and removed his hat, and was just taking off his gloves.

"Ha! it is you, eh?" he said, as the door opened. "What time did you get here, young man? Did you notice the minute, sir?"

"It was exactly eight o'clock, sir."

"Have you a watch?"

"No, sir."

"Then how do you know?"

"I timed myself coming, sir, and when Mr. Rogers opened the door it was exactly eight by the clock, sir."

"Enough. That is proof positive. Rogers is never a minute late or early, to my knowledge. Let me say right here that promptness is the watchword in this establishment."

"Yes, sir."

"And that stands only second to the main motto of my business, which is honesty in dealing and truthfulness in statement. Observe these three things and your future is assured, my boy. Now, your seat is there, and you are to be ready to do my bidding."

"Yes, sir."

Ralph took the seat, and Mr. Ruleman sat down at his desk and began opening his mail.

While he was thus engaged his son came in, who glanced at once in the direction of the chair occupied by Ralph, and next said good morning to his father and sat down.

"Good morning, Hanson," the father responded.

"Got a new boy, I see."

"Yes, and one I think will stay here, too."

"That remains to be seen. The best of them are a poor job lot."

"And there is one good sample in almost every lot, if you only get hold of it."

"Well, I hope you have got hold of it this time. But I have something of more importance than that to talk to you about."

"What is it?"

"I have been suspecting for some time that Rutherton was crooked."

"What?"

The old gentleman dropped letter and opener and sat bolt upright, staring at his son in blank amazement.

"I say that I have been suspecting for some time that Rutherton was crooked; now I think that I have got the proof of it, and I am going to have him arrested on the charge."

"Great Heavens! What are you thinking about?"

"Just what I am telling you, father. I have not been blind, even if I have not been as regular as the clock. I got here a little early this morning and took a look at his books, and there is one item of a hundred and odd dollars that I can swear is forged."

"I cannot believe it, Hanson. You must be mistaken. Why, he has been in my employ for years and years."

"Can't help it; shall I call him in, and ask him to bring his book along? If I wrong him, I will pay him a thousand dollars by way of reparation. But I see no chance for it."

"Yes, call him in."

The son went out and the old gentleman leaned his head on his hand.

"Suspect Max?" Ralph heard him mutter. "Never! I would sooner suspect the accuser, if it came down to the fine pinch between them."

Nothing of this was lost upon Ralph, and, in his heart, he agreed with the old gentleman, and with better reason, perhaps, knowing what he did of the son's crookedness already.

In a few minutes the cashier and bookkeeper entered.

He was a good-looking man, about thirty-five years of age, at a glance, and had an honest face.

He had one of his books with him, and there was a look of wonder plainly to be discerned upon his countenance. Hanson followed him in closely, closing the door.

"You want to see me, Mr. Ruleman?" the man asked.

"Hanson has something to say," was the response. "He has brought you here, Mr. Rutherton."

"Yes, I have something to say," spoke up the son, firmly, albeit he was a trifle pale. "I want some explanation concerning the item mentioned on your books in connection with Smith and Thims."

"What date, sir?"

"Yesterday."

"I did not enter any such item yesterday, Mr. Ruleman."

"How, then, came it on your book? I have been suspecting you for some time, my fine fellow."

"Suspecting me?" turning pale. "Suspecting me of what? I have done nothing, sir; my accounts are straight to the penny, as can be easily proven. I know nothing about the item you name."

"Your face gives the lie to that, you rascal!"

"Take that back!" cried the accused man, dropping his book on the desk and grabbing Hanson's throat. "Take it back, or by Heavens I'll knock you down!"

"Stop! Stop!" cried Mr. Ruleman the elder, springing up. "This scene must cease. Hanson, I am ashamed of you; let Mr. Rutherton defend himself, and you show your proofs, before you charge so severely."

Mr. Ruleman was the largest of the three, and, in spite of his years, he parted them.

"I—I will not be called a rascal by such a man as your son, sir," cried the cashier, hotly. "I assert again that I have done nothing, and I demand now to know the whole of this matter."

"You shall know the whole of it then, sir," said Hanson, thrusting his hand into a pocket and drawing out some papers. "What do you call these, sir? They are forgeries, every one of them! And I denounce you as the forger, as your latest attempt must prove! What have you to say for yourself?"

CHAPTER XIV.

WHICH MAN GUILTY?

Of the two men, Rutherton was the nobler-looking, as any one would have declared.

He had drawn himself up, and it was plain that the worm had turned.

Ready Ralph sat silent, but he was excited.

He was for Rutherton.

"I have this to say, sir," spoke the cashier, calmly: "That I am innocent of any such charge as you have made. No forgeries have passed through my hands, nor could they have done so."

"Pretty well played, but it will not serve you," sneered the son. "What have you to say to that entry on your book of yesterday? I look for another forgery covering that—in fact, I shall not wait for it to come, but will go and ask for the paper."

"Mr. Ruleman," and the accused man turned appealingly to the father, "you do not believe this of me?"

"I do not, Max," was the firm answer.

"Not to be supposed that you could, at first, father," spoke up Hanson. "I found it hard to believe it myself. But, facts are facts, and these have got to be explained away. Here, you boy, step out and call a policeman!"

He turned suddenly and spoke to Ralph.

Ralph rose to obey, but with a glance at Mr. Ruleman the elder, who turned instantly, his fine old face somewhat pale.

"Boy, you sit down there," he thundered. "Hanson, hand me those papers, and I will deal with this matter. Rutherton, do you assure me that you are an innocent man in all this?"

"I sacredly swear that I am innocent, sir."

"Enough. I believe you. Go back to your post, examine well your books, and let me know the amount of shortage."

"Why, sir, my books are right, to the cent—"

"You had better look well," interrupted Hanson. "You may find some thousands mysteriously unaccounted for, and, of course, you will not know how it came about; maybe some one has monkeyed with your books. Ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh was hard, disagreeable.

"Yes, maybe I shall find that some one has," agreed the cashier, looking Hanson squarely in the eyes.

"Well, if you do, I suppose father will be willing to smooth it over for you this time, considering your long service and that it is the first thing of the kind we have dis—"

"There will be no smoothing over," cried Rutherton, fiercely. "If there is a single figure in any of my books not put there by my own hand, by Heavens I will not rest till I have shown up the man that put it there! I have worked too long and too faithfully here to submit."

"Well, go back and let us know what you find."

"You shall know it, have no doubt."

The accused man took up his book again and went out, and Hanson made haste to speak to his father.

"You see how he took it, at first; it knocked him silly. And now he will try to smooth it over, presuming upon your sympathy to help himself out. But he is guilty all the same!"

"I expect you to prove it to my satisfaction."

"And I'll do it. I am going straight to Smith & Thims, and if another paper is there, that will convince me."

"Yes, go and see, and when you come back we will see what further is to be

done. This is the most distressing thing that has ever happened in all my experience."

The son took his hat and went out, and the father resumed his work with his mail, but he was soon interrupted.

The cashier came in.

"Will you give me the dates of those orders, sir?" he asked.

"Take them, look them up, and at the same time examine the orders carefully and see if you can detect the forger."

"You trust me with them, sir?"

"Do as I bid."

The cashier accepted them, his eyes suspiciously moist, and hastened out to his place.

The old merchant continued with his work of reading his letters, and when he had done, tapped a bell, and in a few moments a young woman entered.

She was small, good-looking, and about eighteen years of age, apparently. She had a notebook and some pencils, and sat down quietly at the old gentleman's right hand.

Mr. Ruleman began the work of dictating his correspondence, and this occupied the better part of an hour.

Ralph heard every letter, of course, but there was nothing of interest to him.

As soon as the young woman withdrew, Rutherton entered.

"Well?" asked the old merchant.

"Every one of these is a forgery, sir, and they never came into my hands before this hour. They are entered on my books, but in every case after the account of the party had been balanced and carried to a new page in the ledger."

"So that you were not likely to discover them?"

"Exactly."

"And that would have been a clever way for you to have done it yourself, to escape detection."

"Yes, but not clever enough, sir. I would never have allowed those vouchers to have fallen into the hands of any one but myself on their return to this house, Mr. Ruleman."

"Then what do you think?"

"I prefer not to say, sir. The forgery is a clever imitation of your son's hand."

"And what is the amount of the shortage at the bank, then, according to all these, and the latest one on Smith & Thims, which may as well be figured in. What is the total?"

"Thirteen thousand four hundred and two dollars."

"I will put that sum to the credit of your account, Mr. Rutherton. Keep your books in the small safe, and change the combination."

"Then you believe I am innocent?"

"I do. Let the matter go no further, and keep on with your duties the same as if nothing had happened."

"Thank God, sir, you still trust me. Only for that I might be ruined in this hour. But you heard the vow I made, that I would hunt down the man who has attempted to work my ruin."

"It is my request that you let the matter drop."

"Well, in return for your kindness, I will do so. But please put a man in my place at the beginning of next week."

"What? Surely you—"

"I cannot remain and risk another such attempt, sir, and—"

"You will remain, Mr. Rutherton, but it will be as a partner in the business, with—"

"Never! Hanson Ruleman and I part company at the end of this week, for— But I need not put it into words. I must drop quietly out, sir. Please fill the situation."

The door opened, and Rogers looked in.

"A note for Mr. Rutherton," he said, handing in a sealed letter.

The envelope was a square one, and when he glanced at the writing on it the man's face flushed.

This was observed by both Ready Ralph and Mr. Ruleman, and the cashier was about to leave the office when Hanson returned, coming in hurriedly, with a voucher in his fingers.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed. "Now what do you say, forger?"

Quicker than a wink Max Rutherton's right fist shot out, straight from the shoulder, and Hanson went crashing through the light partition door and sprawling out upon the floor of the store, to the amazement of all who were present to hear and see it.

"Pardon me, Mr. Ruleman," said Rutherton, turning immediately to the old merchant, "but I could not help it, after what you had already asked of me. And, as I cannot now remain, I will hand in my resignation immediately. If I am wanted you know where to find me, sir. I mean," in lower tone, "for the purpose of arresting me on the charge made."

CHAPTER XV.

RALPH'S IMPORTANT TRUST.

But Hanson Ruleman had regained his feet.

His face was contorted with rage, and he jerked a revolver from his hip-pocket.

"Stand where you are, thief!" he cried, leveling the weapon at Rutherton. "I will show you no mercy now. Rogers, call an officer!"

Pale as death, Rogers ran to obey.

"Hanson," spoke up Mr. Ruleman. "I prefer to have my way in this matter, and I do not want Rutherton arrested. I believe him innocent, in spite of everything, and, if necessary, will try to prove him so."

"And I mean to prove him guilty," was the angry response. "Do you think I will let him off, after his striking me?"

"Had it been I, under the same provocation, I would have knocked you down and kicked you afterwards."

Mr. Ruleman spoke with much vehemence, and Hanson turned a sickly hue.

This evidently turned the tables upon him.

"Then you will allow him to go free?" he demanded. "What are you thinking about, father?"

"I am thinking about his long and faithful service, first, and about his innocence next. He will hand me his resignation, and no investigation will be made. I will bear the loss."

Hanson looked dazed, and as if he knew not how to turn.

Suddenly his eyes flashed anew, and bringing his revolver up to a full aim again, for his arm had dropped a little, he cried:

"By Heavens, it shall not be! You don't realize what you are doing, father! Can't you see through the rascal's game? Must I explain the whole matter in public to convince you?"

He was so earnest that he claimed attention, and he went on:

"You are not aware that he aspires to the hand of Miss Westwood, and that knowing he cannot win her, he would like to ruin me. If you hold him innocent, where will suspicion fall? On me, of course. By your words and acts I see that he has already turned it there. He had figured this all out, and knowing your forgiving nature and your appreciation of long and faithful service, he

thought to escape and have me suffer. Do you think I will allow that? By Heavens, no!"

"Mr. Ruleman, I submit," said Rutherton.

The old merchant, pale before, was now deathly so, and he gasped:

"You do not admit that you are guilty, Max? You surely do not admit that you are guilty?"

"Let my trial prove that."

At that moment Rogers returned with a policeman, and as they hastened forward, Hanson directed:

"Officer, arrest that man. I, Hanson Ruleman, a member of this firm, accuse him of forgery and embezzlement, and I will appear against him when his case is called."

There was only one thing for the officer to do.

He advanced and laid a hand on the cashier's shoulder, and the thing was done.

"We'll now see," said Hanson, "whether a mere bookkeeper can lay such a daring scheme as this fellow has laid and escape the meshes himself. He might have trapped a weaker man than myself, but he could not trap me."

There was no call for this, and Mr. Ruleman's face flushed as he heard the words fall from his son's lips.

"Wait, Mr. Officer," he said, "I will go with you, and will enter my bond for bail immediately. I know Judge Warren, and the thing can be done in ten minutes. Now that this matter has been forced, there shall be a full investigation, and the man proven guilty shall suffer!"

He stepped back into the office and got his hat and cane, and was ready, and, telling Rogers to assume charge in the cashier's stead, went out with the officer and the prisoner.

Ready Ralph could have danced for joy when he saw Hanson knocked down.

And it pleased him to see the old gentleman take the stand he did in the matter, for he believed Rutherton innocent.

But he did not feel so elated at the prospect of being left alone in the office with Hanson while the old gentleman was gone, for he had a suspicion that he was recognized.

As soon as the prisoner had been taken away, Hanson ordered the clerks to get at once to their duties.

They obeyed with haste, and Hanson entered the office.

He could not close the door.

Ralph had ventured only as far as the floor, and at the approach of Hanson he retreated to his corner and sat down.

Hanson looked all about the desk, and then turned to Ralph.

"Did you see what was done with those vouchers?" he demanded, in no gentle tone.

"I think the prisoner has them, sir."

"The deuce! He has no business with them. I must go after them and get them before he can destroy them. Father must be getting out of his head, seems to me, to be imposed upon so easily."

Ralph made no comment, but he thought hard.

"Lucky that you are his son," his thoughts ran, "or you might have reason to know that he is in his right mind yet. I guess."

"By the way, boy, where have I seen you before?" Hanson demanded.

"That is for you to say, I guess, sir."

"I have seen you somewhere."

"That is maybe enough, I guess; I have been around a good deal."

"How came you here?"

"Saw the sign, asked for the job, got it."

"Simple enough, anyhow. Where did you come from when you came?"

"Home."

"And where is that?"

Ralph named the street where he lodged.

"And where had you worked before?"

He gave about the same answers that he had given to Mr. Ruleman, the elder.

Hanson looked at him searchingly for some minutes, but Ralph met his eyes with all fearlessness.

When the questions reached their end, Hanson hurried out, and Ralph, as if he had been sent on some errand, went out a moment later, and followed his suspect unsuspected.

And, as Ralph had thought, the man went straight to Mrs. Gowger's.

Seeing him enter, Ralph waited for no more, but hastened back to the store, eager to get there before Mr. Ruleman's return.

"Now, it's him and me for it," he mused, as he went along. "He will know I'm his boy, and he will know that I know he knows it; and he will know that I know a little more besides, and he will have to play sharp. Wonder which one of us will come out on top?"

He reached the store, and presently Mr. Ruleman came in.

"Where is my son?" he asked.

"He said he was going after you, sir, to get back those vouchers," answered Ralph.

"Wants them in his hands, does he? Well, I will give them to him when he comes, and something else besides. Come into the office here, my boy. I want to talk with you."

Ralph wondered what was coming.

"You are a smart boy; you have already shown proof of that," the merchant remarked.

"Well, I have never had any dread of the fool-killer, sir. But, as to my smartness, I doubt it, sometimes."

"You are smart enough to understand all that you have seen and heard here, I am sure. You know that I must believe either my own son or that trusted employee a scoundrel."

"Yes, I see that."

"Perhaps you see more than that."

"Well, I see that you don't want to believe Rutherton the rascal."

"And it is hard to think that my own son is one. I cannot employ a detective to watch him."

Ralph said nothing.

"And I am not going to employ one to watch Rutherton. What I want of you is to learn for me what you can concerning them both, and be sensible enough to hold your tongue. Can you do that?"

"I'll try it, sir, and I'll keep it mum. I understand you, sir."

CHAPTER XVI.

GETTING TO BUSINESS.

Mr. Ruleman held out his hand to Ralph.

"I don't know when I have seen a boy who impresses me as you do," he said.

"I mean to try to deserve your good opinion, anyhow, sir," said Ralph, not knowing what to say.

"I believe that, my boy. Somehow your face impresses me; you are very like some one I know, or have known. You can see that I am placing a good deal of confidence in you."

"Yes, I know you are, sir, and I'll do my level best."

"Well, your time is your own; take hold of the matter just as you please, and let me see what you can do. Come and go as you please, and if any one questions you, tell him you are doing my bidding. Here is some money, for you may have need of money in your undertaking."

"Thank you, sir. And I must ask some questions."

"Go ahead."

"Mr. Rutherton is free?"

"Yes; he is out on bail—a good, round sum."

"Where does he live?"

The address was given.

"And where does that Miss Westwood live, sir?"

"The young lady my son named, saying Rutherton was his rival for her hand? I see. She is the daughter of Norman Westwood, whose address is—"

No need to record it.

"Good enough. Now, where is your son's hanging-up place? That is to say, where does he live? But, I suppose maybe he lives in your house, secin' that he ain't married."

"You guess aright."

"And where do you live?"

He was told.

"Has your son ever been married, sir?"

"Not to my knowledge. Why do you ask that, my boy?"

"I'll tell you that later, sir. Don't mention it to him, sir."

"Just as you please. But it is safe to say that he has never been wed."

"All right; and now I'm off. I am goin' into this thing for all I am worth, you bet!"

The old merchant smiled, and Ralph put on his hat and left the office and the store, setting out immediately in quest of Jigger.

As it would be impossible for him to "spot" both men at once, he would call out his reserve, as Jigger had denominated himself, and would appoint him as deputy for half the duty.

In due time he was on his partner's stamping ground.

Pretty soon he espied Jigger, and he saw at a glance that his work of the morning was nearly over, his papers being almost gone.

"Hello, Jigger!" he called out.

"What is it?" asked Jigger.

"I want my reserve."

"The mischief."

"Fact."

"What's up?"

"I have got work for you to do, and I want you to do your very purtiest, too."

"Well, soon as I sell out—"

"Never mind selling out; just give your papers to Freckles there, and I will pay you for them. I want you right away, and it can't be put off for a few newspapers, Jigger."

"All right, Ready, I will do as you say."

So the partner ran and gave his papers away to another newsboy, and, rejoining Ralph, the two hastened off.

"Now, what is it?" asked Jigger.

"The biggest thing on ice," declared Ralph. And forthwith he began and gave his partner the particulars of all that had taken place to that time.

Needless to say, Jigger was all attention.

"And that's what I want of you," said Ralph, when he had told all. "I want you to shadow one of these men, while I go spotting after the other."

"I'll do it! Which one?"

"I think it will be safest to let you follow Hanson."

"Cause he knows you, eh? I guess mebbey you are right, Ralph, and I'll haze him!"

"But, you don't know him."

"I don't, hey?"

"Do you?"

"Sure!"

"When did you see him?"

"Why, I got a good squint at his phiz when he took you off in that kerriage, o' course."

"Sure enough, you did have a chance then. I had forgotten for the minute."

You will have to take care not to fall into his hands, for he is a bad one right up to his chin."

"I'll be his match, I guess."

"And while you are after him, I will be attending to Rutherton and his part in the play."

"I bet he is innocent, same as you think."

"Sure he is, and Mr. Ruleman knows it, too, and don't you forget it!"

"But, to free him, he will have to put the crime on his own son, Ready, and will he do that?"

"Well, you can bet he will, if he has to. He is just that kind of a man, I tell you. He made it easy for Hanson to fall, but the fellow wouldn't drop worth a cent."

"Mebby, possibly, it ain't a bluff."

"Nonsense! Rutherton is no fool, and if he wanted to do Hanson harm he wouldn't do it in a way that would put himself in a hole, would he?"

"Mebby not; but he—"

"Might jest as well cork right up, Jigger. Rutherton is innocent, and that settles it."

"Well, that's what I said, wasn't it? I was only lookin' at the other side of the question, that was all."

"Oh! all right!"

"And where is Hanson now?"

"Mebby he is back at the store by this time."

"And if he ain't there he will be, eh? All right, I go there."

"And I will go at once to find Rutherton and see what I can learn about him."

"You mean to shadder him?"

"Sure, till I see what he is up to. Soon as I prove him what I know he is—straight—then I will let him in with me against Hanson."

"You think he can help you, eh?"

"I believe he will if he can."

"And is that all we have got to say?"

"Yes; 'cept that our lodgin' will be headquarters."

"All right; we kin go and leave notes for each other, if we don't meet there."

"Yes; and we will keep a lookout near the store, too, when we have business there. Mebby we will fetch things out right— But, great Gotham!"

"What's matter?"

"I have got hold of the wrong end of the string."

"How so?"

"In order to be seen around the store, I have got to be the one to spot Hanson, and you will have to take t'other."

"That is the way it looks, Ready, fer a fact; but it don't make a diff of bitterness to me; I am as ready to shadder the other one, and mebby I kin make a go of it."

"You will have to try it, anyhow, partner, and together mebby we kin work up the case and get the grand bulge on Hanson and find out what kind of a nigger he has got in the fence. If it turns out that he is my dad, I will feel like chopping my own head off."

"Might as well belong to Mrs. Gowger, you think?"

"Almost, anyhow, Jigger."

CHAPTER XVII.

A GREAT REVELATION.

Max Rutherton forgot all about the note he had received.

The excitement at the store, the arrest, the going to the court, the release on bail—his thoughts had been fully occupied.

It was not until he was on his way home, a free man, that he thought of it again, and he drew it from his pocket with great haste and opened it, eagerly reading the message.

The note was from Phoebe Westwood,

and its words caused his heart to beat at a quicker rate. It informed him that all was at an end between herself and Hanson Ruleman, and it requested him to call on her at his earliest convenience, at she had something to say.

Instead of going home, he went there.

He was shown into the drawing-room, and in a few minutes Phoebe joined him there.

"So soon!" she cried, holding out her hand to him.

"I have come as soon as possible," he answered, taking her hand politely and bowing.

"Well, sit down, and I will tell you immediately just what I have to say, and I am going to lay all reserve aside and be perfectly frank with you, Max."

"I am glad of that, at any rate."

"I told you in my note that I have broken with Hanson, or he has broken with me, or both."

"Yes."

"I engaged myself to please papa, whose fortune is tottering, and he thought that by my marrying Hanson he could be placed on his feet all right, and at the same time I would be marrying wealth. I crushed down my love for you, Max, and did that to please papa."

"Phoebe!" catching her hand.

"Yes; but I put him to a test, and he did not stand it. I must confess the same thing to you, fully, frankly, and leave you free to act for yourself. It caused me much pain to reject you when you sought my hand, and I must make amends for it if I can. Listen: I am not Norman Westwood's own child, but a nameless thing adopted by him when I was an infant."

"Thank Heaven for that! It puts you within my reach."

"Maybe you will despise me for coming to you in this way, second-handed, as it must appear, but—"

"Despise you? Never! But," suddenly letting fall her hand, "I forgot that I, too, am under a cloud, and I have no right to talk thus to you."

"Under a cloud—you?"

"Yes. I was arrested this morning for forgery and embezzlement, and I am now out of jail on bail."

"Arrested! You arrested? It is impossible to believe. But it was Hanson who brought it about, of that I am sure. Of course you can prove your innocence, can you not?"

"That remains to be seen. It is employer against employee, you know."

"And what of that? The laws are just for all, or ought to be. What does Mr. Ruleman say?"

"He has given bond for my appearance; I think he feels assured of my innocence; but it will be a matter of flesh and blood with him—it must be."

"That is true, sadly, sadly; I did not think of that. But, Max, be sure of one who will not believe you guilty, and that one is I. It makes me love you the more."

"God bless you, Phoebe. I needed some just such word as that, Heaven knows, but I am guilty until proven innocent, now."

"To me you are innocent; I will never believe you otherwise."

Just then came a ring at the bell.

A moment later a servant opened the door, having a letter in her hand.

"A note for you, Miss Westwood," she said, "and the man said he would wait and see you; but—"

"But—what, Mary?"

"He is not a right-looking person."

"Wait a moment, then, and I will give you the answer."

A glance at the envelope, and she had recognized the handwriting. It was the

same as that of the other mysterious message she had received.

Opening the note in haste, she read:

"Miss Westwood—Break with Hanson Ruleman at once, for he is not worthy of you. Your name is worth more than his name and money together. I have learned something. I want to see you, if you will permit me. You will not regret it. I hold the key."

"ONE WHO KNOWS."

"Tell the person to wait a moment, and I will see him," she directed the servant and as soon as she had gone out, turned to Max.

"I must tell you all about it, Max," she said, "and in as few words as possible. Here is another note from the same person. Read both. You see he must know something about my birth. I must see him."

"Yes, see him by all means," Max agreed, when she had hurriedly given him all the facts.

"Well, do you step behind that portiere."

This Rutherton quickly did, and Miss Westwood signaled for the servant to admit the man.

He entered the room, looking around in an unaccustomed manner, turning his hat in his hands, and finally settled his gaze upon Phoebe.

It was Snide Norwood.

"I have not much to say, miss," he spoke, directly, "but what I do say is as true as gospel. You are a Westwood sure enough, and of good, legitimate birth. I can prove that any time. What is more, I have learned that Hanson Ruleman has no name of his own, and I can prove that. You must get rid of him. That is all."

"Wait, sir."

"Well?"

"You say you can prove these things?"

"I can, if necessary. I have warned you, so take heed."

"The warning is needless, for Hanson Ruleman has already turned from me, on learning my story—"

"He turned from you, pure, sweet and innocent as you are? The dog! Wait, and if I don't make him repent of that, then my name isn't—isn't what it is, that's all."

"And what is your name, sir?"

"They call me Snide Norwood, and I'm nobody in particular."

"But you say you hold the key; do you mean the key to my true identity? I beg you disclose the truth to me here and now."

"That is just what I do mean, Miss Westwood. But I have said enough now. When I disclose the truth it must be to your father, not to you—that is, the man you call your father."

He turned to go.

"At least tell me where you may be found, if wanted," the girl requested.

"Well, I loaf around a good deal at No. — P— street. Anybody around in that section knows Snide Norwood, and a letter to that number would find me. But you better let me alone and let me bring it out my own way, unless it becomes urgent, and then—"

"It is urgent now, sir."

"Why so?"

"I love a true and good man, and I want a name to give him—"

"Give him Westwood—Phoebe Westwood, by gad! There, I beg pardon; but I mean it all the same. That is your name, hard and fast, and here—yes, here is the proof of it, and I will give it to you, since it's more rightly yours than anybody's; here, take this."

He jerked a soiled and worn paper from

an inner pocket and placed it in the girl's hand, and was gone immediately.

Phoebe opened the paper with trembling fingers, and Max was by her side at once.

The paper proved to be a marriage certificate, and they read:

"Snyder Westwood to Phoebe Estrange, May 26th, 18—."

We quote the names and date only.

And then on the back were written these words besides:

"Phoebe Westwood, born March 6th, 18—. See records of church at Silverdale, State of New York."

"Why, it is my name, and the date of my birth—my first name and the date of my birth were on a paper pinned to my dress when I was found," cried Phoebe. "I am the child of Norman Westwood's missing brother!"

"And the man who was just here is your father," said Max, calmly. "There is striking similarity between Snide Norwood and Snyder Westwood."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW JIGGER GETS THERE.

Jigger Huff had one difficulty in his way.

He had never seen Max Rutherton, and thence could not know him by sight.

To get over that snag, he was to go straight to the man's lodging, or home, and ask to see him.

He had a good story to tell, to account for the call, but on reaching there he did not find Rutherton at home, nor could he see a photograph of him.

There was, then, just one more chance, and failing in that, he would have to go and hunt up Ralph and get a new start on the trail. That chance was to go to Miss Westwood and inquire of her.

So he went straight to the Westwood residence.

Just as he was approaching the number, what was his amazement to see the door open and Snide Norwood come out.

Their eyes met, and Jigger knew that he was recognized, but he kept straight on his way, pretending, or trying to pretend, that he was merely taking a stroll.

But that did not save him.

In a few moments a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, and the man had him.

"You let go o' me," cried Jigger. "If ye don't, I'll holler in a way as will make you think somethin' has broke loose—"

"Shut up and hear what I want to say, first," the man interrupted. "I am your friend, now, even if I was your foe before—you and that young pardner of yours. Where is he?"

"That's too thin," cried Jigger. "It won't wash, old man; you let me go or I'll—"

"Hold on; I will prove it to you. I have been hired to trap him again, and the trap is set for two o'clock this afternoon, but I want you to find him and warn him not to walk into it. See?"

"Yer don't mean it!"

"Yes, I do mean it, too. Instead of trapping the boy, I will help him to trap the man. Now, what do you say?"

"It's ruther tough to believe, but you seem to mean it hard enough. What shall I say to Ready that will make him believe it, so he won't walk into the trap you speak of?"

"Tell him this: Young Ruleman—not very young, he ain't, but younger than the old man; tell him that Hanson Ruleman will send him out on an errand at two o'clock this afternoon, and if he goes where he sends him he will go to his

death, unless I might be able to save him, and he mustn't risk that."

"I see."

"Tell him that I didn't know till an hour ago that Titherton was Hanson Ruleman. Tell him to make believe go on the errand, but go straight home and hide—"

"He won't do that; he is in the field for work, is Ready—"

"Well, you and he, then, come and see me at another place, and I will tell the boy something and give him a boost."

"Yes, but how do I know that this last ain't a trap?"

"Great Scott! Bring along a squad of police, if you want to. But tell the boy not to give it away to Hanson, and to act as if he had no suspicion. See?"

"I think I do."

"I am against that fellow, now, right from the shoulder, and we can bring him up with a round turn, if we work together. Tell the boy to start in the right direction, but to switch off as soon as he is out of sight of Hanson, and come to —" mentioning an address.

"This is a square deal?" questioned Jigger.

"Confound it, yes! I will be at the place named, alone, to meet you and him. But, bring along a detective, if you are afraid. I can't speak any fairer than that."

Some further particulars, and they parted.

This put such a new look upon the matter that Jigger gave up the trail he had started on and went to the Broadway store.

He passed it slowly, without looking in, hoping that Ready would see him, and, as it happened, Ralph was at that particular moment just coming out, going on an errand for Hanson.

Under the orders of the junior partner as well as those of the senior, he could not refuse to obey when an order was given.

He saw Jigger pass, and in a few moments was up with him.

"What's up?" asked Ralph.

The partner explained fully as they went along, and Ralph listened with closest attention.

"Hang me if it ain't beginnin' to stir hard, it is gettin' so thick," he cried, when Jigger had done. "I meant to look out for squalls on these errands for Hanson, anyhow."

"Nothin' will happen this time; he will send you on two or three, so as to give ye confidence in him, and then when he sends you off at two o'clock he will expect you to walk right into the trap."

"That is it, sure enough, Jigger."

"Then you think Snide is playing us fair?"

"Not a doubt of it; he wouldn't have warned us, if he wasn't."

"That is the way it looks to me, too. Well, I will be on hand, sure pop."

"Yes, you must not fail to connect, Jigger, for I want you on hand to do your share."

"And what shall I do meantime?"

"Try and find Max Rutherton, and size him up, and if he is all right, get him to come with you."

"Ha! That is a thought worthy of you, me lord. I will do it, by me hallydum! And if we won't make it lively fer Hanson, then I will eat my old hat. I bet we are on the winning side, Ready."

Their plans understood, they parted, and Jigger went once again to the home of Rutherton.

Max had just come in, and Jigger was shown up to his room.

"Well, who are you, boy, and what do

you want?" he asked. "I'm told you were here once before to see me."

"That's straight," said Jigger. "Mr. Ruleman has 'ployed a detective to help clear up your case, and I am helpin' that detective. Now, if you will deal right straight with me, I can give you a pointer."

Max had closed the door, and Jigger had spoken in a low tone.

The man now took him by the arm, led him to a seat, and, sitting down opposite him, demanded:

"Of what use are you to a detective, I should like to know? I am more inclined to think that you are a tool of my enemy's, and unless you can prove to the contrary I shall hand you over to the police."

He watched the effect of these words.

Jigger did not appear to be the least bit disconcerted by them.

"Do that if you want to," he said, coolly, "but it won't pay. I am here because I am not likely to be suspected. I am on your side, if you are innocent, and that is what we all believe."

"Then whom do you suspect?"

"Hanson Ruleman."

Max looked serious in an instant.

"I see you are on my side, my boy," he said. "But, you cannot help me, for I cannot clear myself at his expense, for he is my employer's son, and—"

"Be hanged to that! Your business is to prove innocent, and let Mr. Ruleman take care of his son afterward. That is what Mr. Ruleman means to do anyhow."

Max recalled what the man Snide Norwood had said about Hanson.

Was it true that he was not Ruleman's son? This certainly went to indicate it.

"See here, boy," he demanded, "what do you know about a man named Norwood, who is called Snide, whether that is his name or not?"

It was Jigger's turn to be surprised now.

"How do you know that I know anything about him?"

"I do know it. To prove yourself, give me a straight reply to my question."

"Well, I will talk straight," said Jigger, promptly. "He nabbed me when I was watchin' Westwood's house to get on track of you, and proved that he was on your side in the game."

"Tell me the whole story—beginning to end."

And Jigger, satisfied now that Rutherton was all right, did so, holding nothing back, and as a result Max agreed to work with him and Ralph, meet Norwood, and work the matter up.

Accordingly, they only had to wait for time, and at two o'clock they set out for the place appointed.

CHAPTER XIX.

GRAND FINALE.

Meantime Ready Ralph and Hanson were playing a quiet game.

Each understood the other, to a certain degree, and Hanson thought he had the best of the game, but it was the other way.

Ralph found nothing to find fault with, and had he not known what he did, might have been deceived; but, knowing, he saw all the more clearly the cute game the man was playing.

He ran several errands for him, and Hanson had every reason to believe that the boy trusted him, or, at any rate, had no thought of suspicion. To Hanson, it was as if the boy thought he had completely fooled him as to his identity, and hence was out of all danger.

So it continued till two o'clock.

At that time, or a few minutes earlier,

Hanson sent the boy out upon another errand.

Ralph listened to his directions attentively, and set forward the same as on the other occasions, and Hanson smiled grimly as he saw him leave the store. It was not necessary to follow him.

Ralph went in that direction for some distance—the direction of the place Hanson had named—but he soon turned, and in due time joined Jigger and Rutherton, who were waiting for him with Snide Norwood, and the four went to a place where they could consult quietly and arrange their plans.

When they separated, every detail was understood.

Ralph returned to the store.

When he entered, Hanson looked at him in amazement undisguised, and a shade of color left his face.

"You must have made a mistake, sir," said Ralph, in a quiet, straightforward manner. "No such person known there, and it did not look like a business house, anyhow."

"Where did you go?" demanded Hanson.

Ralph repeated the directions he had received.

"Well, it is deuced queer. The man must have given me the wrong address, then. Never mind it, now; I will see to it myself."

"All right, sir."

Ralph entered the office, where Mr. Ruleman sat, and took his place on the chair in the corner.

Presently Hanson left the store, and then immediately Ralph told Mr. Ruleman the whole matter from beginning to end, and gave him the details of the scheme that had been laid.

"You are going out?" asked Mr. Ruleman at dinner that evening.

"Yes, sir," answered Hanson. "Why did you want to see me for anything, father?"

"Would like to consult with you. If you are in by ten that will be ample time, and you will find me in the library. Come there when you come in. I shall be busy till ten."

The son went out, and Mr. Ruleman repaired to his library as soon as he rose from the table, where his wife joined him. She was younger than he by twenty-five years, and was a handsome woman. Her face wore an anxious look as she took a seat near her husband.

"What is the meaning of all this, Donald?" she asked. "What is the surprise in store for me?"

"You must wait and see, dear wife," was the kindly answer. "I will caution you not to become excited, and I will say this—be prepared for a glad, a glorious expose."

"I cannot imagine what—"

"Of course not; but fix your mind upon the one great event you would most desire to happen."

She looked the amazement she felt, but he immediately changed the subject so that she could ask no further questions, and the time passed, until presently there came a ring at the bell.

Many steps were heard in the hall, and the butler opening the door of the library, a company of men, women and boys entered, some of whom Mrs. Ruleman knew, but most of whom she had never seen before. And Mr. Ruleman conducted them immediately into an adjoining room.

There he left them, and rejoined his wife.

"Donald, what does it mean?" she asked. "I cannot bear this strain. I am all on fire with curiosity."

"A little longer, dear, and you shall

know all. It is a glorious surprise for you, as I said. Now, let me finish what I was saying, and by that time no doubt Hanson will be here."

He resumed, and before he finished his son entered the room.

"It is not yet ten, Hanson," said Mr. Ruleman; "but, no matter, for I am all ready and waiting for you. Sit down, and I will come at once to the business in hand. You look nervous. What is the matter? But maybe you have hurried. Compose yourself a moment."

Instead of that, however, the man became even more nervous, and his face was a picture of commingled wonder and apprehension.

A few moments, and Mr. Ruleman tapped a bell.

The butler entered, crossed the room, and opened the door of the room adjoining, and the company there filed immediately into the library.

They were Norman Westwood and his daughter, Max Rutherton and Snide Norwood, Ready Ralph and Jigger Huff, Mrs. Gowger, and some others of more or less importance.

At sight of them Hanson sprang to his feet, his face like death.

"Keep calm, Hanson," said Mr. Ruleman. "Ladies and gentlemen, be seated. I will come to the business immediately. Mrs. Ruleman, make room for this boy there by your side," indicating Ralph, and pushing him in her direction.

Ralph took the place, and as the woman looked into his face he noticed that her own became deathly pale, and that her breathing was quickened. With a quick movement she caught hold of Ralph's left hand, pushed up his sleeve and looked at his wrist, and with a scream she caught him to her breast.

"My boy! my child!" she cried. "My stolen baby restored to me at last! God be praised for this great blessing!"

Hanson Ruleman moved to the door, while all eyes were upon Mrs. Ruleman, opened it quietly, and was about to step out, but a strong man met him, snapped a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists, and forced him back into the room.

"Not quite done with you, Hanson," spoke Mr. Ruleman's voice, hard and cold and calm. "And when I am done with you, the law will take you in charge. You have run to the end of your evil course, and you shall have your just deserts. Now, attention, if you please."

"Thirty-four years ago, when you were born, your nurse was one Jane Rutherton. She had a sister who gave birth to a child about the same time that my son was born, and you are that child. Your name is Hanson Rutherton. Jane Rutherton is here to testify that she exchanged you for my child, and she can prove the assertion. My son is Max, my faithful cashier and bookkeeper. I am glad of it."

"Nor is this all of your story, Hanson Rutherton. My first wife died, and after some years I married again. You were then twenty-two years old, and you hated your stepmother, because you looked upon her as robbing you of a certain portion of my wealth. Then, when her son was born, you were still more enraged. When that boy was three years old, he was suddenly missing. It was you who stole him. You put him in the keeping of this woman, Susan Gowger."

"The wonder to me is that you stopped even at that. In fact, you planned to have the boy killed this very day, but Providence was against you. It was you who forged the orders at the store, and tried to ruin Max, to disgrace him in the eyes of Phoebe Westwood. When you thought she was a child without a name, you spurned her, but she has a name, while

you have none yourself. Norman Westwood had a brother, Snyder, who married an actress named Phoebe Estrange. The proud family cast him off for this, but Phoebe Estrange was of noble parentage."

"A child was born to them, and they named her Phoebe. The mother died, and the father, poor and ill at the time, placed the infant at his rich brother's door, the brother having no child of his own, and his wife greatly desiring one. That child was the Phoebe Westwood you see before you here. What more need I say? There is ample proof for every assertion I have made. For proof of identity, a birthmark on the left wrist of this boy, which his mother has recognized, shows that he is my child beyond a shadow of doubt. And, I am glad he is. I have now two sons to be proud of in my old days."

Impossible to quote all that was said in that hour. Let us merely record the outcome of it all. Hanson Ruleman got his just deserts. Max Ruleman and Ralph were received into their rightful home, and Max shortly afterward married Phoebe Westwood. Her father was cared for in right manner. Jigger Huff was given a place in Ruleman's store, which he fills admirably. Max became the partner, of course, as will Ralph, in due time. And so we take leave of them, one and all, not a little proud of the child of our fancy, whom we have seen fit to introduce to our readers as Ready Ralph, the Rustler. Sober, honest, upright, truthful; may our boy readers take pattern and aim high.

THE END.

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